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MICROSOFT'S VISION OF THE FUTURE



Kinect: the catalyst for a new era in gaming, or a 32X for 2010?





Twenty years ago, Sega launched its Mega Drive. The console was a notable success, especially in the US, attracting players who enjoyed its hefty selection of explosive, no-nonsense actioners and multiplayer games. Five years later, Sega launched its 32X, an oddly shaped peripheral in black plastic which plugged in to the Mega Drive hardware, upgrading its capabilities and promising players new worlds of entertainment. It was not a notable success. In fact, if you look hard enough you can identify it as the first step towards Sega's ultimate failure in, and exit from, the console hardware market.

Five years will also separate the launch of Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Kinect, an oddly shaped peripheral in black plastic which… well, you get the picture.

There are other parallels, too. At launch, the 32X unit retailed at £170/$160, a price point loudly condemned not only by Sega's competitors but by Mega Drive owners, too. At £130/$150, Kinect is a considerably cheaper option, especially when you factor in inflation, but just like a 32X it hardly sits comfortably within impulse-purchase territory.

Sega's and Microsoft's add-on solutions were both designed to be transformative, redefining their respective landscapes to not only enhance the consumer experience but re-energise ageing hardware and extend its lifespan. The fundamental difference between 32X and Kinect is that Sega's mushroom-shaped Mega Drive add-on was all about watered-down versions of arcade hits, while Microsoft is offering something genuinely disruptive. Can it fly? That's something we consider with this issue's cover story (see p68), in which we talk to the execs driving the charge, along with game creators who are producing some of the key software that will launch alongside Kinect.

At the very least, Microsoft cannot do any worse than Sega did when it attempted to lay the very foundations for motion-based gaming with its Mega Drive Activator add-on. If you missed it during the early '90s, you can watch everyone's favourite videogame fan, Roger Ebert, demo it via YouTube (tinyurl.com/goroger).



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"If you shoot him, you'll just make him mad."



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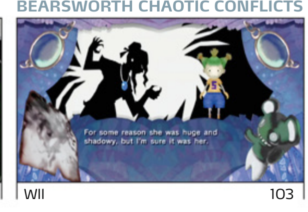


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ONLINE

Boom forecast for cloud-based gaming

Gaikai might just be the future of the cloud, but don't get ahead of yourself. This is just the demo

What's the CPU speed of your iPhone 4? How much RAM does it have? What's the peak download speed from your network in kilobytes per second, or the average size of an app? What's the framerate of your favourite game? Do you know? Probably not, unless you're in the tiniest and geekiest minority of iPhone's 27 million customers. When something 'just works' as advertised (well, mostly), it's very hard to care.

Gaikai, the latest of several live streaming solutions for playing games online, aims to be something similar. It is not, insists CEO **David Perry**, a replacement for your desktop gaming rig. Trading inputs from your PC with video and audio piped from its own top-end servers, it completes the transaction almost instantly, a game like *Spore* becoming playable mere seconds after clicking a link. Thanks to a deal with EA announced at E3, games like *Spore* and *Mass Effect 3* are the kind it plans to sell. But that plan, for the moment, is where its involvement stops. Gaikai will serve you an instant playable demo, but you still buy, download and play the full games as usual.

After a year spent working closely with Adobe, Gaikai can open a browser-based session using Flash after a single button-click. There is, it's claimed, no need for an extra plug-in. So, if you want to play a demo of *Lego Star Wars: The Original Trilogy* (an example we have demoed to us lag- and hassle-free), you just click an advert and your existing technology takes over. There are many reasons for such a service starting small: one is that its potential, touching every corner of the gaming universe, sounds like science fiction.

"We wanted to demonstrate ubiquity, so we've put clients on to anything we can: iPhone, iPad, Android, Xbox, Mac, Windows – anything we've got time for," says Perry. "Anything with an internet-connected screen can play games." To prove the point, current demos include *World Of Warcraft* running on a debug Xbox 360, sharing a game with someone playing through Facebook.

"You've seen it historically," says co-founder and CTO **Rui Pereira**. "There've been many examples where a certain new format only kicked off when you removed all barriers. Like digital audio, where you had tons of different plug-ins over the years, and it was always kind of OK but there were problems, and out of those came resistance. Then there's something like Flash, where YouTube launched and suddenly no one thought about it any more. That's precisely because no one had to install anything new. So we're just riding the trends and putting something new on top of it.

"I'd love to see a really badass console that we can stream to, and there's a device built into it like a flatscreen you can pick up and walk around your house with"

"The piece of hardware I'd love to see – and this is how I'd see Gaikai working with consoles," says Perry, "is that you have a really badass console that we can stream to, and there's a device built into it like a flatscreen you can pick up and walk around your house with. So you can continue to play the game wherever you go. If you're going to the kitchen or going to bed, you can literally lift off this piece of glass with the game on it that costs 50 bucks, that has no CPU whatsoever and no storage whatsoever. Nothing but a Wi-Fi chip and a decoder. And I'd want it in stereo 3D, on something as flat as you can get. It would be like peering into another world. That's just one of the things you get without any work from this."







Publishers have complete control over the nature of Gaikai's pop-ins, which users will be able to immediately click through in order to begin playing even high-end games with great results

From the heights of *Earthworm Jim* and *MDK* through the mire of The Matrix and out into the hidden world of MMOG publishing, the ups and downs of Perry's career reflect the balance of his various personalities: the whizz-kid, the pragmatist and the entrepreneur. Notably out of whack during the crazier days of Shiny Entertainment, they're very much in sync today. Stepping between talk of smart business models, bleeding-edge tech and the realities of streaming as it exists right this very minute, he paints a convincing portrait of a Gaikai-enabled world.

More so, dare it be said, than clear competitor OnLive. Perry has a lot of respect for the service which launched in June; it has, he says, "had to solve the same technical problems of managing a network, and they've gone through that pain as well." But the roads they've taken are different.

"Every step of the way, when they turned left,





Gaikai CEO David Perry (left) is currently working with co-CTOs Andrew Gault (centre) and Rui Pereira to bring their technology to its launch phase. The forward-looking Electronic Arts is already on board – expect it to be followed by a bundle of similarly big names soon

Cloud-based competitor OnLive has been accused of putting the cart before the horse, its dream scenario of complete subscription-based gaming at odds with the global infrastructure of the internet

we turned right. It continues to this day – every single thing. We're trying to keep it real. We're not building a peak network from day one, this whole idea that everywhere you go… Because you're paying a subscription [with OnLive], you expect to have a good connection; based on the way the internet's wired, that's a bit crazy. You can certainly serve millions of people in cities with good connections, but to charge a subscription and expect it everywhere you go, that's tough."

Rule number one of cloud-based gaming, then: the customer always comes first. By leaping to the point of selling and providing full games, OnLive has arguably created more problems than it's solved. Gaikai, focusing instead on the deeply unsatisfying pre-sale experience – and a deeply expensive one for publishers – has got it the right way around.

"I've had a lot of conversations with publishers, and they automatically say they're putting customers first," says Perry. "No, they're not. All they're doing is buying the customer's 'lead', the thing that makes them jump through all the hoops. I haven't spoken to one company yet that's sat their attorneys down and asked what the least number of clicks they can do it in is. Can you wrap it all around one 'accept' button? They never know the answer because they never ask. Having this conversation with everybody is becoming part of our DNA."

The Gaikai pitch, then, is one of opportunities rather than promises. For gamers, who depending on their connection and kit might see a Gaikai pop-in on major websites soon (if you can't run it properly, the advert simply doesn't appear, and you can opt out of seeing them altogether), it's an alternative to spending longer downloading and installing than actually playing. Perry rightly picks up on the ghastly PlayStation 3 experience, where having updated firmware and downloaded several gigabytes, you then have to wait even longer for your demo to install. The same goes for another company target, beta testing. When do you always have to download patches? Just as you're sitting down to play. Perry: "I find myself trying to do everything at once. I do all the firmware updates, I download

No joy?

Will control be lost in translation?

In a world where platforms from iPad to Facebook are playing the same games, isn't the lack of a ubiquitous controller a problem? "Absolutely. Controllers are always going to be the elephant in the room," says Perry. "The good news is that we do have a translation system built in that will translate any device's controls to our server – think of everything being remapped in realtime. So if you're playing an MMO on an iPad and there's a button that needs to be tapped, on our server you can effectively simulate that. But it's by no means ideal. The long-term solution is that, if developers like the idea that you can put a 15GB game into Facebook, they need to start assuming that people might not even have a keyboard and mouse. They really have to think that through."



Assuming it runs without a hitch, what might Apple think of Gaikai hosting indie games that sidestep the App Store and its approvals process? It's something neither company has to worry about just yet, though





Gaikai runs *Super Mario Kart 64* (right) perfectly under emulation: you could imagine Nintendo making it available to play via its own website. Similarly, Lego's website would be a natural home for Gaikai-powered *Lego Star Wars II* (below)



We're shown *Spore* being streamed and played in fullscreen with enough apparent clarity for the text to remain legible. The real test will come when more fast and furious games start pushing it to the limit. If it does become a problem, will publishers develop Gaikai-specific UIs? And what about users limited to playing in a window? How will the interface scale?





five things at the same time, and then I just leave it. Just preparing to play takes planning."

For publishers, the opportunity seems irresistible: to reach vastly more players at greatly reduced cost, taking the demos to them rather than vice versa. At the time of writing, deals with Intel and Limelight Networks – "They want us to achieve that goal of being the fastest network in the world" – are soon to be announced. "It's old-school thinking versus modern thinking," says Perry. "Old-school is that you build a site and send everyone to it, which makes a lot of sense and you can see why everyone does it. But the minute you get into that situation, it's very expensive to move those people around. So how do we get away from that and let you play on top of the article you're reading?

"Embedding in all the right places is key to us. It seems obvious but to publishers it's really not. Moving people around would've killed YouTube." We point out that not doing so still cost YouTube owner Google a reported $2 million a day in 2009. He laughs: "Well, that's the opposite way of doing things, I suppose: you make the service and then you worry about the business model. We've never deviated from our business model, which is pretty cool. We're not on our fourth plan, which is normal in these situations."

Who pays for Gaikai? It could be the consumers one day, says Perry, but right now it's publishers and retailers. It's no secret that the company is charging one cent per minute of streamed content. "It might sound a lot, but to buy a Google click in America it's 50 cents to a dollar. That could be 50-100 minutes of gameplay. They're giving you a visitor; we're giving you a player.

"And if people don't like your game – sadly, it's mathematically true that more don't than do – if we can keep the cost of the failed position down, that's the most important thing. So if someone leaves after two minutes, the entire fail cost is two cents. There's no TV advertising or billboard or anything that costs anywhere near that. That's why we're having absolutely no problem raising money. We don't want to own the customer, we're not nagging you for information. We're happy if you only play for two minutes because we know you tried."

This investment, he continues, is funding the creation of one of the most ambitious proximity networks in history. "We haven't done it in a subtle way. Getting closer is the key. That idea of a 1,000-mile reach, which is what OnLive have announced, is scary. I want to be within 50 or 60 miles. So in England, to be clear, you stick a server in London… Yeah, but then what? I want to go into Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow, Belfast – every major city should have a Gaikai server. That's how you get that 'surprisingly close' thing." There are 11 Gaikai servers now, he says, next to OnLive's three, with around 14 planned for launch. "My expectation is that we'll be at around 50 by the time we're done in the US, with lots more all over the world."

"We don't want to own the customer, we're not nagging you for information. We're happy if you only play for two minutes because we know you tried"

The final pieces of the puzzle are, for now at least, virtualisation – the servers' ability to run multiple games simultaneously – and the streaming technology Pereira has developed over two-and-a-half years. This is going to get more interesting, says Perry, the cheaper it gets. "Imagine if I can get Coca-Cola to pay for your first month of *StarCraft*. That seems crazy, right? But it's actually not. That's the kind of thing that we'll keep pushing on, the price, until we reach the point where games are sponsored by people so you just get to play. The way we understand it, OnLive has two games running simultaneously per server; we're currently at 14. That's 14 normal [resolution] or ten in HD."

But will you care about those numbers as Gaikai launches over the coming weeks? Or will it 'just work,' and casually change how you preview games forever? It's certainly not a service for everyone. "For the super-hardcore guys who don't mind downloading a gigabyte demo – someone told me today there's a 40GB demo out – maybe not," admits Perry. Replacing the experience of a console, furthermore, is simply not the point. "A compressed image will, by definition, affect it," says Pereira. "It's impossible to compete with the PlayStation 3s of this world."

At the very least, though, and even if it somehow fails, it's an eye-opener – the biggest, maybe, since the announcement of Steam. What if your ultra-portable netbook, 'merely' capable of running fullscreen video and broadband, could emulate the most powerful gaming rig in the world, harnessing the power of servers with cutting-edge graphics cards, top-end CPUs and solid-state RAID arrays full of the latest and greatest games? What if indie developers could use it? Perry has pledged any spare resources to just that idea. What if you could use Photoshop across a dozen computers, with the power of dozens more, without any install or setup? It's also on the agenda. Doubt it or not, you can't help but imagine this world amongst the clouds.

INTERVIEW

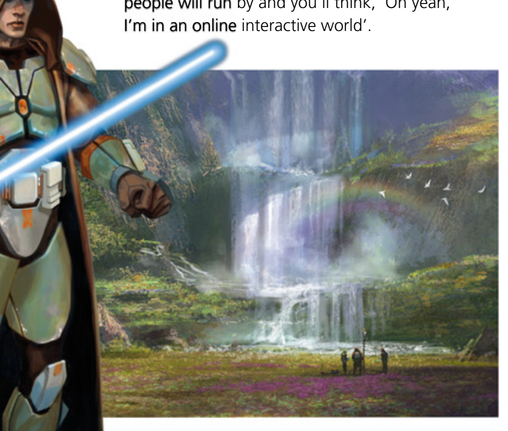
A massive undertaking

Can BioWare bring its brand of knightly conduct to The Old Republic and create a Star Wars MMO that works on all levels?

The announcement that BioWare would be taking the helm of a new Star Wars MMOG was greeted with as much confusion as joy. Although the company is familiar with the brand (having released *Knights Of The Old Republic* for Xbox and PC in 2003), its expertise has traditionally lay in content that responds to the player's decisions – hard to do in an online space with hundreds of players who all have different and possibly contradictory aims. It's an issue that the team is clearly still struggling with, though it's clear that **Greg Zeschuck**, BioWare's vice president, believes it is a challenge it can conquer.

> **"We're not exactly in safe territory with the Star Wars licence, especially because we are changing some of the fundamentals of the story – purposefully"**

***The Old Republic* feels like a very traditional MMOG, only with a BioWare 'layer' of story. Was that the intention?**
I think largely it was. One of the things we appreciate is that in some ways Blizzard and others have set the standard of what you expect from an MMO and what we wanted to do was add a layer of BioWare stuff on top of that. So it's got all the MMO stuff plus that story element, but it's interesting. The more you play you might find this, but you almost forget you're playing an MMO. You can 'solo' it, and then suddenly some people will run by and you'll think, 'Oh yeah, I'm in an online interactive world'.



Is that going to be enough to distinguish it?
We always want to be differentiated, but we're not trying to push the envelope to the nth degree. We're just trying to be successful, and we think one of the routes to success is that, you know, people like something they're familiar with. If you put a few twists on it you're in a sense creating something that's higher risk than doing something completely different. And with the Star Wars licence, we're not exactly in safe territory, especially because we are changing some of the fundamentals of the story – purposefully. I'm curious to see how some other MMOs – the ones that really change things up – do, such as *APB*. I think what they are doing is great, but what we planned is largely what we've done; a lot of players are looking for something new, but within the framework of the MMO experience they already enjoy.

Is it possible to give players personal, individual stories in the MMOG space? In the E3 demo, plot points related to a 'cleared out' enemy base that other players were still battling enemies in.
That's the challenge in the MMO space; you can't literally clear out a public space. We will instance quite a bit, zones that are yours alone and you can affect them, though you'll be able to bring other players with you. We're walking this interesting line. The potential for innovation is actually pretty significant if we can find the balance. We want to offer these personal stories and also group spaces, and how do we keep things clear and manage them? Well, we're trying to, for example, make it super-easy to share and do your personal quests with other players.

It's largely an internal challenge. We want this to be seamless to the player, but it's one of the big things we're grappling with.

Did you consider following *Warhammer Online*'s trend and offering repeatable 'public quests' – perhaps offering more story on the massive scale?
We took a serious look at the public quest system, especially since Mythic is now part of the BioWare group and we have direct access and talk to them all the time. But there are always pluses and minuses to these systems, and while we do offer some similar ideas that have story elements to them, such as our PvP, we really wanted to focus it down to personal stories. It's an interesting balance and one of the reasons we've still got work to do on the world and its potential interactions. Certainly repeatable story content is valuable, but what I found disconcerting about public quests is you found yourself just cycling through them to get all the items before moving onto the next one. It isn't so bad an activity, but we want to keep players moving through our content rather than getting stuck on them.





With 'personal stories' and BioWare's intent to support its games as services, is the future of singleplayer gaming the MMOG?
Yes, we are really orientated towards operating our games more as services and platforms, and I think you'll find the platforms will probably expand to involve some online, some singleplayer. There are always different kinds of players; lots of people like online shooters, and *Mass Effect* is basically a shooter to a certain degree, so we've looked at that really seriously, but those same people can

The Old Republic sees conflicts arise between the re-emergent Sith and the Galactic Republic. It's set 3,500 years before the events of the Star Wars films



BioWare vice president Greg Zeschuk co-founded the company in 1995

also love story elements, and if you're in with 30 other people who are all shooting up the place there's not space for that. The good thing for us is now we've created these properties we have the ability to explore these things. For example, with the Hammerhead DLC [for *Mass Effect 2*] we are able to find out – do people like it? Do they want more of it? If they do, then OK, we'll add it to sequels, other DLC packs… We're able to detect how much people play it and can tell. We've planned a very organic growth in the development of our franchises.

In turn, however, MMOG communities are very resistant to change, to characters being 'nerfed', for instance, as they're viewed as a consistent, ongoing experience.

It's true, I'd always complain about my warrior in *WOW*; one minute he's too powerful, the next he's not, and back and forth. You see, even though we will want to evolve things, we want to evolve them via content. You don't want to just change the core mechanics, because it's a bait-and-switch on the player; you attach yourself to a certain type of character, and if they are really changed, you feel like you're ripped off. I think our kind of evolution is largely going to involve content, or be additive. We don't want to go back to our core mechanics and tweak them; we're going to test the heck out of things and hopefully get them right.

How right do you think you've got it so far?

We expect a lot of changes. It's interesting, because it's reached that first kind of really playable stage, where you have a sense of what it's going to feel like. It's a fairly polished vision of how it could play, and I think our characters feel right. We didn't want people to play Jedi or Sith and feel weak, because that would be ridiculous. We wanted to make these characters feel powerful, but also give rational reasons why a bounty hunter or a smuggler could take them on.

They are also all really nicely differentiated – we wanted to make sure people could see the associations. The smuggler is a 'Han Solo' character; there are some obvious connections. It's about making these characters stand out, but believable relative to each other.

Newswire



Blizzard blows over on Real ID

In what might be seen as a blow for the socially networked future of gaming predicted by industry analysts, Blizzard's plan to require its forum users to use its new Real ID system – which reveals users' full names – when posting has been scrapped. Blizzard faced a flurry of criticism both from users and gaming sites, concerned over a potential loss of privacy for forum users. One Blizzard employee's attempts to quell the flames by providing his own full name backfired when users unearthed his age, address, phone number and family details in minutes. Within days, Mike Morhaime, Blizzard's founder and chief executive, scrapped the plan.





Itagaki set up *Devil's Third* developer Valhalla Game Studios with other former Team Ninja members after 16 years at the Tecmo-owned developer

In the early days, I think about the strengths or weaknesses of the hero or enemies, things like that. It's about slowly fighting a war that I think I can win so I can provide you with a war that you think you can win. So, at the early stage, it's high level, and at this stage [with *Devil's Third*] I go deeper and deeper into the moment.

Ah! Another important thing is drinking alcohol. The love letters you write at night after drinking… they're usually not that good. But you write them, and when you wake up the next day and re-read them, you find there are lots of beautiful gems there, and you rewrite them.

Many of your contemporaries have said that the Japanese game industry is dying. Do you agree with that?
I agree. Japan failed to import capitalism, or rather, it failed to understand the lessons of capitalism, of the free market economy. What I'm talking about isn't just limited to the games industry. I'm talking about what has happened in Japan since the '60. Japan's destiny – the destiny of this era – was already determined then. Didn't I say I was one of the top three most knowledgeable in the industry?

Japan was a rising power from the '60s until the '90s, though, right?
Yes. They were doing great. But in the years they were doing great, they had to prepare things. The infrastructure, education, the things you need to do to continue to be that way. But the older generation failed to do that. But don't think I trust those people who are trying to change things now. It's not a good idea to trust people who are yelling things have to change. They're salesmen, just salesmen with something to sell.

Do you consider yourself lucky to be as successful as you have been in such a climate?
Well, of course I was lucky, but at the same time, I'm successful because I am a 'real' Japanese. What I'm trying to say is that in the '60s, the Japanese people were forced to think about what they were good at, what their originality was, about how they deal with the outside world, and especially what their weaknesses were. Once they were doing well, they still had to think about those things, but they became too interested in making money rather than evaluating themselves.

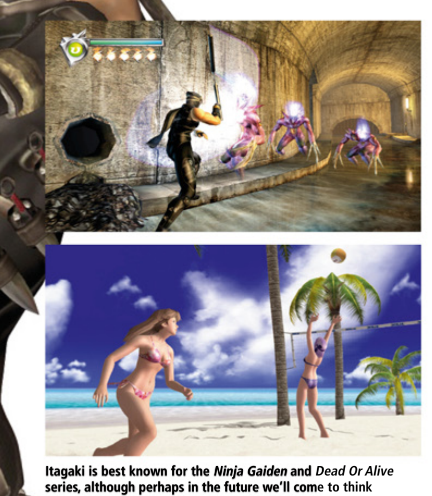
Listen, we're talking about something really important – politics – so we have to make this really clear. Maybe you should ask a question like: "So, are you interested in becoming a political candidate?"

Are you?
No, ask it.

Are you interested in becoming a political candidate?
Yes. There have been some offers for me to become a political candidate in Japan, and we do need a strong leader.

Do you think Japan would accept a leader who dresses like you?
I think so. No, they will. Think about it. Japan is such a hot country, and yet all the current leaders wear suits all the time. Does that make any more sense?

I'm much more picky about how I dress. But, you know, there are a lot of things I haven't done in this industry, so I'll probably stay in it until I die. After all, I'm a real Japanese; I know to look inside at my own strengths and weaknesses, to know where my individuality lies. I only talk like this because I want people in the UK to know there are people who actually care about these things. Rather than just saying that the Japanese videogame industry is over, really thinking about why.



Itagaki is best known for the *Ninja Gaiden* and *Dead Or Alive* series, although perhaps in the future we'll come to think of him in terms of shaking up Japan's political system



SOFTWARE

Memento moreish

We talk to the creators of fun app EpicWin about splicing real-world chores with gaming

We never got round to taking those Spanish evening classes. We didn't do those Maya tutorials like we promised ourselves we would. We haven't even cleaned out the fish tank. We have, meanwhile, found the time to collect all of the agility orbs in *Crackdown 2*. The disparity between our willingness to self-improve in the real world and level up in the virtual one is well documented. But with *EpicWin*, an iPhone App-cum-game by **Tak Fung** and **Rex Crowle**, it's possible to combine the two, gaining loot and levels for every chore we check off the list.

It's not a wholly new idea, as Crowle and Fung readily admit. To-do list applications have existed for some time, and several of them even award you points for completing your self-set tasks. But *EpicWin* goes above and beyond, tying your progress to a character's advancement through an RPG-lite gameworld, spoofing the conventions of the fantasy genre as it does.

"You don't always have time for an 80-hour RPG – but if you blend it with your life then you've got time to have an 80-year RPG"

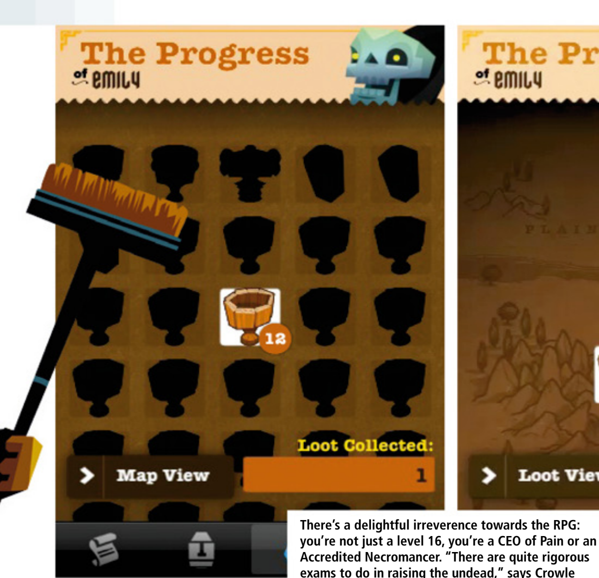
"The seeds of it were right back in our Lionhead days when we were playing this game called *Progress Quest*," says Crowle, who has since worked as an illustrator and animator for hire, lending his talents to Disney and Media Molecule among others. "Actually, it wasn't really a game, more of a metagame. In fact, it's probably more accurately described as a progress bar."

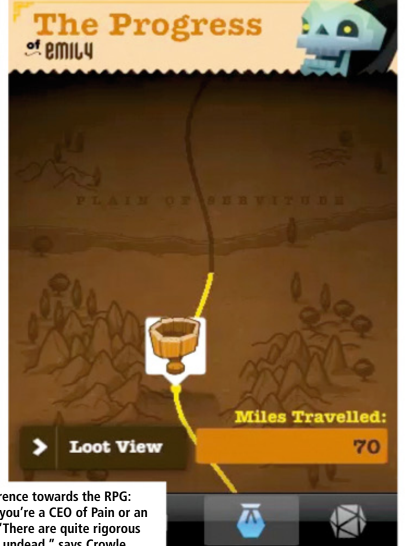
"It was almost a screensaver," says Fung. "You'd leave it on and it'd level up. We could have been curing cancer or unravelling the human genome, but, no, we were just levelling up."

"And yet it was just really compelling because the RPG setting is so ripe for humour," says Crowle. "Because it had a high-score table, we got completely obsessed with it. We'd just leave our computers on for months. If you crashed at all, you'd fall thousands of places down the chart."

Progress Quest was ahead of the curve; the idea of arbitrarily tying numerical advancement to activities has since come very much into vogue, with apps like Foursquare dishing out points for buying a sandwich from the same shop every day.

"There's a trend at the moment, particularly at advertising companies, to put high scores on to everything," says Crowle. "It's a way to make web





There's a delightful irreverence towards the RPG: you're not just a level 16, you're a CEO of Pain or an Accredited Necromancer. "There are quite rigorous exams to do in raising the undead," says Crowle

Newswire

28th ANNUAL GOLDEN JOYSTICK AWARDS

Going for gold

From 270,000 public votes come this year's Golden Joystick Awards shortlist. It's been whittled down to 16 categories which, for the first time, are defined by genre, pointing not only to the multi-faceted nature of current trends but also to the variety currently on offer in our fast-growing medium. The presence of Online and Download categories will surprise few who've kept up with the rise and further rise of the MMOG and DLC spaces, with nods to *Farmville* and *Plants Vs Zombies*. Vote in as many categories as you can while waving a motion sensing device at www.goldenjoystick.com.

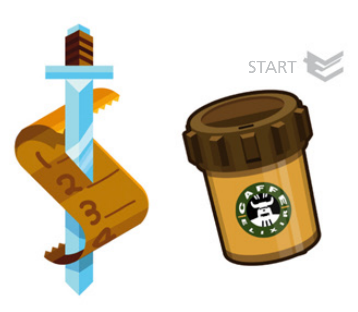
Voting closes mid-October, with the winners announced at the end of that month.





"As you progress in your real life, you progress in the map world, you can see the next town and you're always pushing forward to the next goal," explains Crowle (above). "The to-do list apps out there are possibly a bit complicated for what I do," says Fung (top)







content more sticky and bring people back. It works to a point – particularly at the moment because it's quite new. But if it's just a score there's no real narrative to it. What RPGs do well is take high scores and apply them to a story. Levelling up doesn't stop with the number 20 – it means you look a certain way and you've had certain experiences to get to that point. So *EpicWin* brings a bit of that delight and surprise we get from videogames and transports it into something which enables you to be a bit more productive. You don't always have time for an 80-hour RPG – but if you blend it with your life then you've got time to have an 80-*year* RPG."

"When you cross off a chore and something nice happens, you link the two together and you want to go back and do more," says Fung. "There's a lot of loot you can collect, and you can see if you're missing the Horn of Whatever; you want to keep on doing more stuff to get that next item. With an RPG you can bring in character and story and turn it into something cohesive."

But you won't find an RPG with the depth of *Dragon Quest* beneath *EpicWin*'s checklist of chores. Fung and Crowle have thought carefully about the balance of game and app – and this is very much a to-do list with game trappings rather than a full-scale game.

"We didn't want to go as far as having a game that you could lose," says Crowle. "If you haven't taken out the trash you won't lose all your health and have to start again. But at the same time we didn't want it to be just stats and numbers, so we needed that streamlined gameworld."

Since you determine the value of each task and attest to its completion yourself, the ease of cheating would make any larger-scale game something of a farce. As its purpose is always clear, the only person you're cheating is yourself.

"We can manipulate the gameworld a little bit," says Crowle "So if you're inputting hundreds of tasks every minute, we can scale things so you aren't progressing quite as quickly, but ultimately it's just a case of: why would you cheat? What's the point really? It's sort of like a fat kid boasting that they've learnt how to cheat at *Wii Fit*."

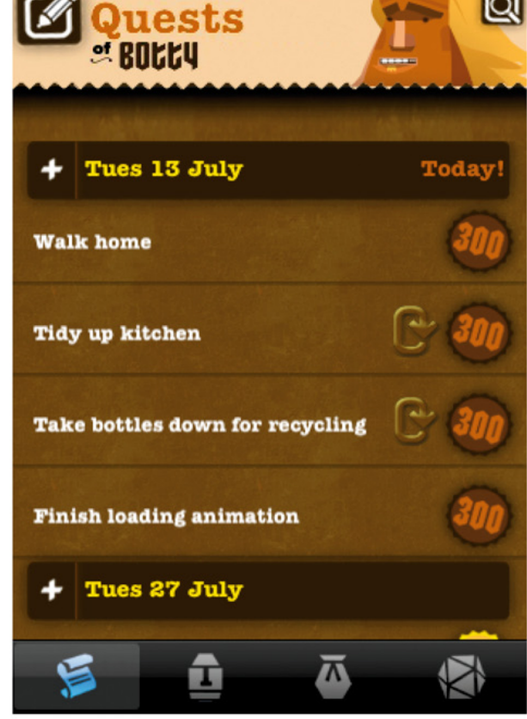
"I like the idea that people have their own communities where they self-regulate," says Fung, outlining a more connected, social future for the app. "People make quests for their friends and then prove that they did it to each other. That's more exciting to me: we've set it up and now we're letting people play around with it."

"My girlfriend's been very keen on the idea of shared task lists so she can add tasks for me," says Crowle. "I'm not so sure about that. I'm keen on it for everyone else – just not for me."

"It should exist on a lot more platforms and it would be great to have them all communicating," says Fung, placing an Android port on his own to-do list. "I would like to put it on a shared site so you get group activity. At the moment, you're on your own little adventure – and you can share your achievements with people, but to get to the next level would be to actually have interaction. That's the natural next step if it takes off."

And no doubt Fung and Crowle will get a whole load of XP if it does.





"A lot of people have asked how we stop people from cheating," says Crowle. "They have all sorts of ideas about how the iPhone can read the sweat on your palm. I felt it would be more interesting to have a little less system and just let people play with it"

SOUND BYTES

"Poor Aaron Greenberg – he's on the PR team, he hasn't seen it since last year, so he came up with this stock answer that Milo is alive and well and living in Guildford but it's still a tech demo."
Peter Molyneux forgets the job title of the director of product management for Xbox 360 and Xbox Live

"With the likes of Lara Croft, Jill Valentine and Alyx Vance well established on the nation's consoles there are no shortage of female characters in videogames, but behind the scenes things have for too long been dominated by men – perhaps explaining why the likes of Miss Croft look the way they do!"
Lynne Featherstone MP, Minister for Equalities, clearly isn't above a spot of *Resident Evil 5*

"We can have one to two pages of games coverage in any one issue. So we're less likely to cover games from small developers. My editor will say: 'Never heard of it, next!'"
Associate editor **Rory Buckeridge** explains why you're unlikely to see *Ancient Trader* in the pages of Nuts anytime soon

"I resent having some triple-A studio jerk come and tell someone who's run a microstudio for 13 years that he is doing it all wrong."
Positech's **Cliff Harris** doesn't take kindly to Epic co-founder Mark Rein's assertion that there are better ways to run a business

"Good luck with your studio and games in the future. If you'd like to discuss this by phone I'd be happy to speak with you. I'll try not to be a 'triple-A studio jerk' :)"
Mark Rein disappoints everyone with a modest and self-deprecating reply





INTERVIEW

Cave story

We visit Cave's development studio in Tokyo's Shinjuku district to talk about taking bullet-hell to touchscreens

The hardcore bullet-hell shooter has scorched eyes and cramped hands for the whole of its history, with its waves of miniature foes and pulsing chaos as iconic an image of Japanese arcades as you'll find. It's not the most obvious fit for Apple's iPhone. The key players at Cave's Mobile Content Department, fresh from a superb version of *Espgaluda II*, would beg to differ. Scrolling down-screen, four giant bosses approach: producer **Yukihiro Masaki**, director **Mamoru Furukawa**, and programmers **Yuma Matsuda** and **Shingo Hozumi**.

"We had long discussions with the members of the original arcade team to define what direction to go in, how to use the iPhone to the best of its potential"

How and why did *Espgaluda* – a core arcade shooter – make the leap to iPhone?
Yukihiro Masaki: From our perspective, the iPhone made sense. This is a major platform we can't afford to ignore. We had our first try last year with Matsuda's *Mushihime-sama Bug Panic* [a spin-off from the popular series that more closely resembles a top-down twin-stick shooter, but which is currently unavailable]. When *Espgaluda II Black Label* was coming to Xbox 360 [via XBLA] we thought we could use the occasion to release an iPhone version as well. When we decided to do it, we didn't wonder if it could be done, but how the unique aspects of the iPhone could be harnessed.



***Mushihime-sama Bug Panic* continues the series' insect theme, and requires the player to string together chain reactions of exploding enemies with the help of three bombs of their own**

How did the development team react when the decision was made to bring *Espgaluda* to iPhone?
Yuma Matsuda: I thought someone had gone mad! I mean, if you consider the graphics, the Xbox 360 itself isn't ideal for 2D. We worked hard to make *Espgaluda II* possible on that console – now we've brought the same game to the iPhone.
Shingo Hozumi: I've been involved with many ports to phones, and we've never really managed to make a perfect port of a title to those platforms. So when we were given this project, to be a perfect port of the original, well… we had long discussions with the members of the original arcade team to define what direction to go in, how to use the iPhone to the best of its potential. We had no reference in front us, no precedents.

How did you overcome the challenges you were facing, such as the controls, graphics, speed, and so on?
Mamoru Furukawa: The iPhone is not very good at 2D. When it came to danmaku [the barrage of bullets] it rapidly became a burden to the performance so we had to work hard to find the right solution, graphically, to ensure enough resources to allow the game to run smoothly.
Matsuda: I was really concerned with delivering the graphics. I wasn't concerned about the controls. Taito's *Space Invaders* for the iPhone had proved it could work. Their slide controls were quite well adapted for the needs of a shooter.
Masaki: I was interested to see how other companies were working. In the west I feel there is a lot of communication, but in Japan – and especially in our company – we aren't so good at that. I thought this project was a good place to change that. Matsuda-san really got lots of



From left: programmers Shingo Hozumi and Yuma Matsuda, director Mamoru Furukawa and producer Yukihiro Masaki











The *Espgaluda* series has a slightly complicated backstory involving winged teenagers, but all you really need to know about the iPhone version of *Espgaluda II* is that it's very tasty

support from [veteran creator and bullet-hell godfather] Tsuneki Ikeda.

What do you think of the iPhone hardware?
Matsuda: Without buttons and a D-pad, it's difficult to compare the iPhone's feel to that of platforms we're used to, but at the same time features like the GPS and the camera bring new possibilities. These are creative challenges that I'd like to explore.
Hozumi: We need to change our established habits of gaming through the use of buttons and a D-pad. So we have to think in a different way.

How did you promote *Espgaluda II*?
Masaki: It's not easy to promote this type of game on the iPhone – I had to come up with ways to push the title prior to release. I had to do my homework. I wanted to release the game to the entire world, not just Japan. I knew that if I didn't use external avenues to iTunes, very few people would ever know about our game. I used Twitter, blogs, YouTube. It was more challenging than with a packaged game. The first video was when people realised such a game could run on an iPhone as intended. The only problem was overseas – we had our in-game video posted on the site March 31/April 1 and the reaction was: "Nice April fool!"

The bullet-hell shooter has had a hard time finding its place commercially in the current generation of consoles. Do you think downloadable avenues, and specifically Apple's iPhone, are the future?
Masaki: I think so, yes. It makes the genre more accessible and affordable. On the iPhone you have a variety of pricing with an average around a dollar. The iPhone makes content available everywhere to anybody and at a reasonable price. We've been selling packaged games for a while now but our producer, [Makoto] Asada, has already decided to test an online release with an original title this summer on Xbox Live. We also plan to go for original content on the iPhone. We believe there is the place for both digital and packaged distribution. I see the iPhone as a means to make players not only enjoy our games but also raise awareness about our packaged products as well.

Do you think the iPad would be a more interesting platform to develop arcade-style shooters for?
Masaki: We already have users who are requesting that we develop a shooter for the iPad, but we need to study the platform further to see what can be done and how. There is the issue of whether to develop a game especially for it. Plus, we already see a few technical obstacles, again with the amount of memory. Only Apple can solve that one.

So, can we say that this game is only the first of many Cave shooters for iPhone?
Masaki: You can indeed. We are already gearing up for our next shooter [*Dodonpachi Resurrection*, due this summer]. We need to try to deliver something even better than *Espgaluda II*, something that defines the spirit of Cave but also offers some fresh experiences. Watch out!



Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown includes new costumes and animations, but brings no new characters to the franchise. It will integrate with Twitter, however, to broadcast your victories



Running rings

Card battling games move to define new arcade hardware at Sega's Private Summer Show in Tokyo

Traditional videogames defined Sega's new Ring arcade hardware over the course of its first 12 months in the guise of fourplayer action-RPG *Shining Force Cross* and ten-vs-ten mech fighting game *Border Break*. However, the company's recent Private Summer Show was dominated by card-battling titles that seek to make innovative new use of the technology. The most heavily promoted of these at the show was *Sengoko Taisen*, Sega's apparent replacement for the hugely popular *Sangokushi Taisen* series, a networked arcade trading card game that runs on the Intel Pentium E2160-based Ringedge board.

Sega also used the event to announce the formation of a new division, one specifically charged with developing the company's strategy in the arcades

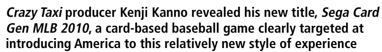
Developed by Sega's AM2 division, players assume the role of a feudal Japanese warlord battling it out in networked SRPG-style bouts that are loosely based on historical scenarios. The game makes use of the Flat Reader system, in which cards are placed on a glass-like surface and used to control units through physical movement. AM2 has expanded the system by introducing Touch Action, which means the game can sense if a player's hand is resting on a card after it has been moved, and thereby trigger or alter character actions accordingly. With game modes that allow users to compete locally and nationally via Ring's ALL.net online service, *Sengoku Taisen* is expected to mirror and likely surpass the success of the *Sangokushi Taisen* series, not only in Japan but also China and across Asia, where this style of game remains the most popular arcade experience currently on the market.

Under Tomy's licence, Sega also unveiled two versions of a new Transformers game: *Transformers Animated: The Chase*, an action driving game, and *Transformers Animated: The Shooting*, a more traditional shooter. Both versions are played with trading cards in a similar way to *Sengoku Taisen*, and feature two sets of controls for cooperative play. Aimed at the younger end of the market, the game dispenses a new card every time it's played, so players can fatten their decks quickly. Released to support a new Transformers animated television series that debuted in April, it's still too early to see if the property is resonating with a new generation of children, and much of the games' success is reliant on the popularity of the wider franchise, rather than their own qualities.

Despite the emphasis on card games, Sega is not abandoning its more traditional videogame releases. *Border Break*, which draws inspiration from *Counter-Strike* in its squad-based battles, has won a significant following across Japan, one that it has managed to maintain and even grow since release. While there was no footage on show, Sega did announce the development of *Border Break Air Burst 2.0*, an update to the original that reportedly introduces additional






Crazy Taxi producer Kenji Kanno revealed his new title, *Sega Card Gen MLB 2010*, a card-based baseball game clearly targeted at introducing America to this relatively new style of experience







The success of the Transformers card games seems almost entirely reliant on whether the television series and manga they support can gain a foothold with young Japanese players





Sengoko Taisen's Touch Action mode works extremely smoothly. For example, position a card and remove your hand to see the onscreen unit move as and where indicated. Leave your hand on the card, however, and you'll watch the unit fire its weapon at a rival battalion

classes to a title that may inspire a whole new genre to enter the arcade scene.

The announcement of *Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown* was no surprise, and seems likely to be the final iteration of the immensely popular 3D fighter on Sega's now last-gen Lindbergh hardware. The game includes all of the expected updates such as balancing and new costumes, but the introduction of Twitter updates via its VF.net community feature and a new, home console-style solo game mode dubbed Knockout Trial Special add real bulk to the game, with a series of stages themed around different cultures.

The recent resurgence in the popularity of golf in Japan has resulted in a boom in Tokyo golf bars. Sega is looking to capitalise on this opportunity with Let's Go Golf, an arcade experience that seeks to simulate the sport as accurately as possible using a combination of real clubs, a projector and multiple sensors that surround the player. While, with its use of pro golfers to instruct players, the title is clearly aimed at the simulation end of the market, there is also a party game mode that tests various aspects of the sport in order to let a group play together.

Sega also used the event to announce the formation of a new division, one specifically charged with developing the company's strategy in the arcades. The firm pointed out that, while the division will not be responsible for initiating new projects initially, it will help to create synergy and co-ordination across all new arcade titles being developed, presumably with the aim of reversing the trend away from arcades both in Japan and around the world. The company indicated that the shoots of this strategic change within the company would become visible at the JAMMA show in September, with a new, coordinated approach to maximise the potential of the Ringedge and less powerful Ringwide hardware.

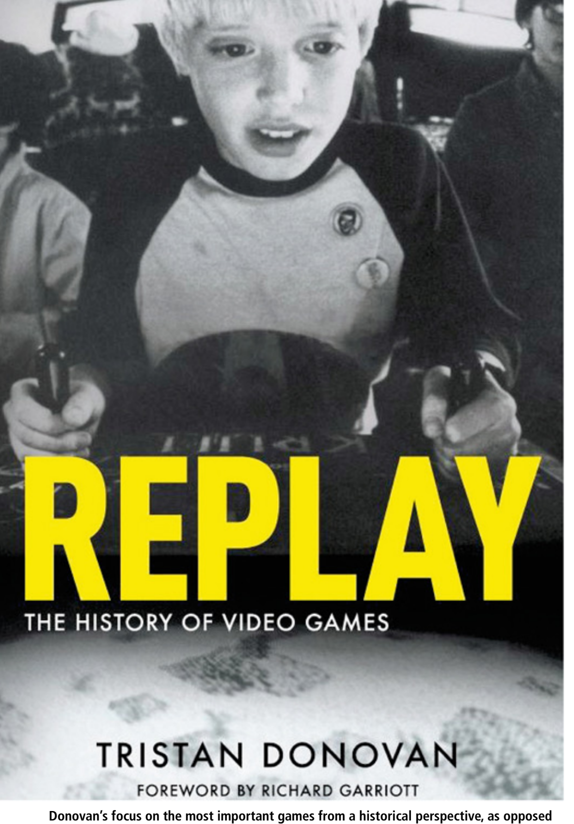


WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

How do you get a reluctant baby to eat its greens? You make it fun: "Here comes the plane! Wheee!" A recent Volkswagen initiative turned to the world of gaming to help transform activities as disparate as recycling, obeying the speed limit and wiping the mud from your feet into fun (thefuntheory.com). But is it simply a matter of throwing in a scoring mechanism and some flashing lights? No, says Sebastian Deterding, a user experience designer and game researcher at the Hans-Bredow Institute for Media Research. And he's got 97 slides to tell you why that's the case in this breezy but enlightening presentation, investigating the tangled relationship between interfaces and entertainment, chores and challenge. How different is *Eve Online* from filling in your tax return? Would buying a train ticket benefit from a puzzle element? Food for thought made easily digestible – without the need for plane noises.

Site:
Just Add Points
URL:
bit.ly/c6cG7Z





Donovan's focus on the most important games from a historical perspective, as opposed to merely studying critically acclaimed classics, leads to some interesting inclusions and omissions. There is, however, an extensive gameography divided by genre at the back

BOOK REVIEW

Replay: The History Of Video Games

Uncle Clive rubs shoulders with Shigeru Miyamoto in a look back at gaming's heritage across the globe

Videogame histories may always kick off with *Spacewar!*, but they tend to continue in the manner of *Pong*, bouncing back and forth between the paddles of Japan and the US, charting a familiar tale of boom and bust as they lurch from the days of the Tech Model Railway Club to the Xbox's hijacking of Times Square. Tristan Donovan's Replay: The History Of Video Games certainly doesn't ignore the crucial beats of the last 50 years but, to earn its spot on an increasingly crowded shelf, it has something else to offer alongside all that: a more global perspective.

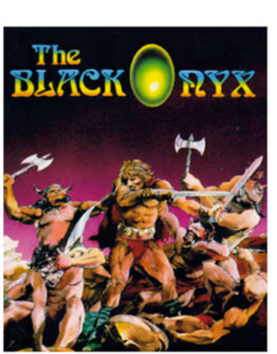
And so, in between the descent of Atari and the rise of Nintendo, Donovan has room for a chapter on Sir Clive Sinclair and the ZX80, while wedged next to the likes of Eugene Jarvis and Ed Logg you can expect to read the odd quote from Jeff Minter. This breadth of interest offers far more than local colour: for the first time, it's possible to get a sense of the full extent of gaming's reach, and the often bizarre influences that have helped it to grow. Whether it's charting the peculiar tastes of the French and German game markets or detailing the creation of the Nimrod, an early British computer designed to play parlour games, Replay finds the right stories to set an increasingly familiar narrative within its proper context.

Donovan has room for a chapter on Sir Clive Sinclair and the ZX80, while wedged next to the likes of Eugene Jarvis and Ed Logg you can expect to read the odd quote from Jeff Minter

Although some of the book's material is, inevitably, growing rather threadbare – the stealthy Cold War machinations that eventually landed *Tetris* on the Game Boy should be familiar to most readers by now, while the way Miyamoto's childhood explorations inspired *Zelda* seems more massaged with every retelling – Replay contains its fair share of genuine surprises, too. Donovan has a keen eye for the unexpected detail, be it a page devoted to the recording of Buckner & Garcia's album of videogame-inspired pop songs, or a mid-1980s visit to Amstrad to see Alan Sugar encounter *OutRun* for the first – and possibly only – time (he didn't see what all the fuss was about, and was soon out of the videogame business for good).

When he's not expanding gaming's borders, Donovan's seeking to prise videogame history away from the release schedule of the major consoles. Focusing on the software rather than the hardware stops the book from sliding into the traditional corporate narrative, and it's a strategy that's aided by the author's appealing willingness to let developers speak for themselves. Anecdotes, ancient grievances and embarrassed admissions bring a much-needed warmth to Donovan's generally rather dry prose, and the personal touch, born from material gathered in hundreds of new interviews, often helps to present the more well-trodden aspects of the story from a fresh perspective. The birth of thirdparty publishing with the formation of Activision is enlivened by quotes from a frustrated David Crane, and other highlights include the ever-affable Henk Rogers providing a guided tour of his struggles in getting *Black Onyx* – the game that would introduce the RPG to Japan – to market.

And throughout, while Donovan's not the most animated of narrators, he remains engaged, fair-minded and analytical. Striking a near-perfect balance between art and commerce, Replay is the most comprehensive history of videogames so far – and one that manages to make the steady emergence of a massive global industry seem both vital and unlikely.





Donovan looks at plenty of well-known classics, such as Sega's *OutRun* (above), but also makes room for the likes of *Black Onyx* (left), the game credited with introducing RPGs to Japan

Continue



PlayStation Move
Ahh, the smell of freshly manufactured hardware

iPhone 4
Hey, we don't want to make *calls* on it

Ad-hoc party
Unheralded, but a great PS3 'app'

Quit

Online mudslinging
"No, *you* smell of bums." "No, *you* do." And so on

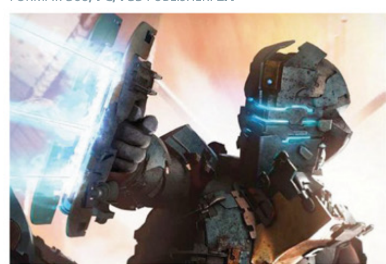
Our favourite beanbag
Even more knackered and out of shape than us

Sensor overload
OK, running out of room around the TV now…

INCOMING

Dead Space Ignition

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA**



The first of 'many exciting game extensions' to *Dead Space 2* uses a text-based interactive comic book format and minigames to set up the game's story. A playable prequel novel, perhaps

Dragon Age 2

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA**



Scandal! It seems a 'sense of satisfaction and familiarity' is the most *Origins* fans can expect, the next game moving into *Mass Effect 2* territory with a vaguely customisable story character

Fallout Online

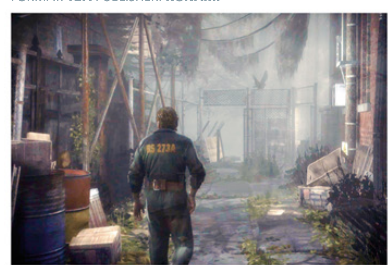
FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **INTERPLAY**



Now a Bethesda licensee, series creator Interplay promises greater control over your destiny, if not the fate of the online Wasteland. Register at fallout-on-line.com to be fast-tracked for the beta

Silent Hill 8

FORMAT: **TBA** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**



Really? It feels like only yesterday we were playing number five. Armed only with junk, players follow prison inmate Murphy Pendleton through various side-quests and a 'classic' storyline

WRC

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **BLACK BEAN**



Not quite the only WRC game – both *Gran Turismo 5* and *Dirt 3* share the licence – but the only official dedicated one. Developer Milestone promises 78 stages, 13 countries and 550km of road

Stellar Dawn

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **JAGEX**



The latest MMORPG from Jagex, its 'deep and compelling sci-fi', should be 'accessible and playable on almost any PC or Mac with an internet connection' a sizeable portion being free to play

Rock Of Ages

FORMAT: **TBC** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**



After the freakish beauty of *Zeno Clash* comes another curio from ACE Team, a tower defence game in which you either confront or control a giant rock with a face. Five historical art styles feature

Back To The Future

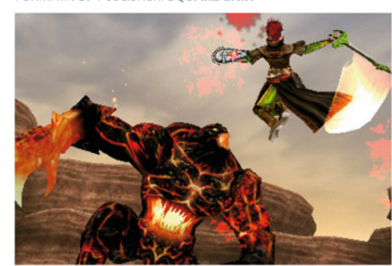
FORMAT: **360, MAC, PC, PS3, WII** PUBLISHER: **TELLTALE**



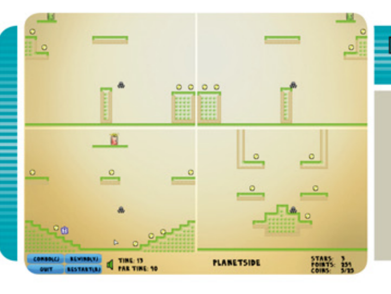
A brief public survey should have given Telltale plenty of ideas for its episodic treatment of the movie trilogy. Hopefully it ignored any requesting deathmatch multiplayer and Nolan North

Lord Of Arcana

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**



This 'simple, rewarding and brutal' action game features creature designs from world-renowned artists, thousands of weapon combinations and fantastical visuals that 'push PSP to its limit'



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Hello Worlds

tinyurl.com/hellowo

As part of the University of Washington's Computer Science program, the creator of *Hello Worlds* aimed his Flash game sights on a subversion of gaming conventions. A splitscreen platformer for one person, *Hello Worlds* tests your sensory perception and spatial awareness as you strive to collect coins in each of four segments. Your actions in one world spill over into the next, meaning that impossibly high platforms in one area can be reached by jumping from a lower one in another.

As many of the titles featured here have promoted (see *Company Of Myself*, E214), a high concept doesn't need to make a compromise with an arbitrary style. *Hello Worlds* is no exception. Like a muted, pastel *Super Mario World*, the look is a crisp, cool relaxant for the eyes, with a smooth synth mix keeping your blood pressure low as you navigate the challenges and aim for perfect scores.

When you hit your stride with *Hello Worlds* it's the videogaming equivalent of juggling, albeit with no one laughing in your face when you fumble.



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EA prepares for the future

Piers Harding-Rolls examines EA's digital strategy and what it could mean for gamers everywhere

As we know, for at least ten years a major transition has been taking place within the games sector as publishers grapple with the implications of the widespread use of broadband internet to consume entertainment media. The transition is the shift from a product-based business, with content delivered on discs and in boxes, to service-based opportunities using internet connectivity. I now believe that 2008 was probably a high point for the sale of packaged games, reflecting as it did a very active population of handheld, console and PC gamers. It is unlikely that the consumer spend on boxed games will ever hit these lofty heights again. As such I expect a decline in packaged sales in 2010 compared to 2009 even with the launch of exciting technology such as Kinect, Move and the 3DS.

Some publishers have been more active than others, but EA stands out for its aggressive acquisition activity and a well-developed digital strategy





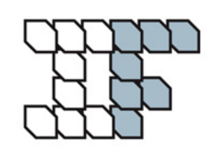
***FIFA Online*, EA's microtransaction-supported online football game, has been enormously successful in Asia since its launch in 2008**

So where does this leave the traditional games publishers? It leaves them having to manage a declining packaged business, which they dominated, while ramping up exposure to new and untested digital opportunities, the markets of which are populated by many new small and nimble competitors. Some publishers have been more active than others, but one company, EA, stands out for its aggressive acquisition activity and a well-developed digital strategy. EA now has activities in mobile games and apps, social games, traditional PC casual games, MMOGs, mid-session online games, retail-equivalent PC downloads and online console downloads – basically all online games opportunities worthy of note. EA's digital business was worth 15 per cent of the company's revenue during the last fiscal year (ending March 2010), up from ten per cent in the previous year (see chart on next page). The company hopes to expand this to 19 per cent over its next fiscal year.

This increasing share not only reflects the increasing importance of online games in general, but also EA's well-thought-out digital strategy, which I believe positions the company strongly for the future. The company now 'owns' leading positions in a number of online markets. EA Mobile is the leading publisher-owned mobile games business, and holds a strong position in the operator-based mobile market while expanding into apps for the latest smartphones. EA Playfish is the second largest social games company and is easily the most extensive social games business owned by a traditional games publisher. EA Pogo is the largest traditional PC casual subscription service operating globally and still has around 1.6 million subscribers. The company has also had success in Asia with *FIFA Online*, and is bolstering its premium subscription and microtransaction business.

While its digital business is more advanced than that of many publishers, the company is now coming up against a new breed of competitor, especially in the social games and smartphone app markets, many of which have been built from the ground up as service companies and are more nimble and fast moving than EA's comparatively





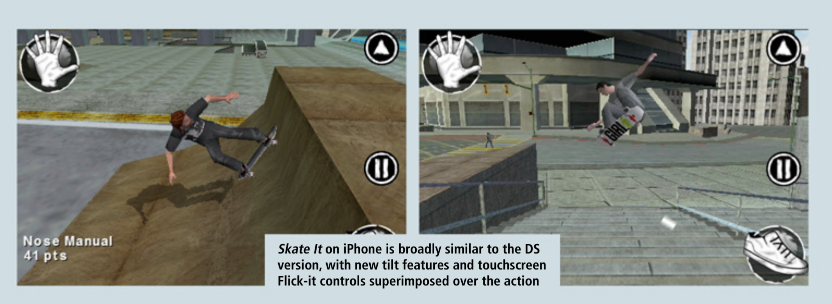


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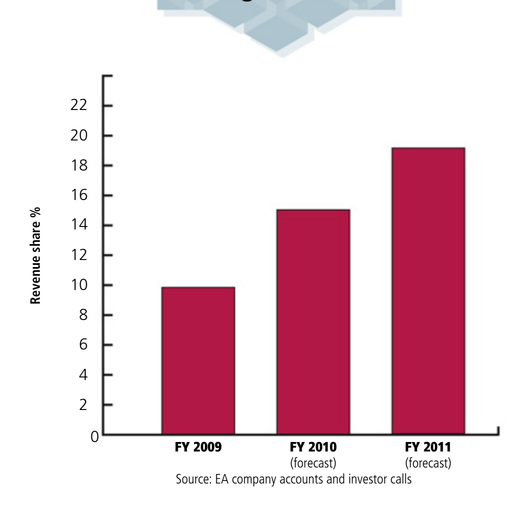


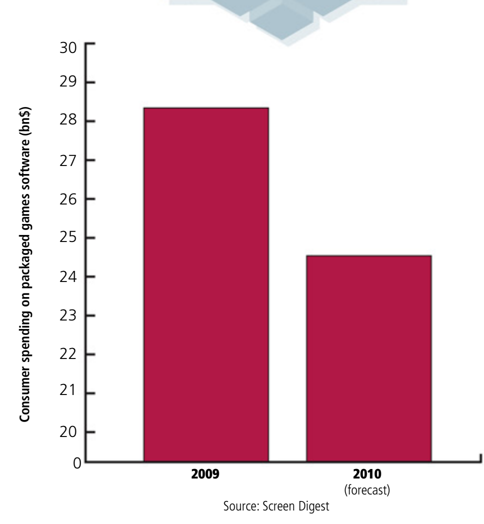
New technology such as 3DS (above), PlayStation Move (see previews starting p42) and Xbox 360's Kinect (see p68) may well be drivers of packaged game sales but, thanks to easily accessible online stores, downloadable games are now extremely attractive to players

vast business. EA holds its own advantages over these companies, of course, including a massive portfolio of intellectual property and financial scale, but in sectors where ongoing and quick delivery of content and services are core to success, EA is risking being outmanoeuvred by smaller companies. Indeed, all the ingredients are in place for EA, but without a continuing effort to re-engineer the company to operate service processes efficiently across multiple online markets, its drive to deliver long-term growth from digital initiatives could become unstuck. And this is a tough challenge that faces all traditional publishers – in essence trying to manage the decline of one traditional large-scale business while in parallel growing another faster-moving and fragmented opportunity.



Skate It on iPhone is broadly similar to the DS version, with new tilt features and touchscreen Flick-it controls superimposed over the action





SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

The iPad problem

Christophe Kagotani looks at how Apple is forging a love/hate relationship with Japanese consumers



In 1984, the birth of the Macintosh saw a hammer thrown at the PC. Apple has come a long way since then, and the company has successfully reinvented itself, becoming the digital lifestyle champion of its time.

Many youths in Japan talk of their iPods like they would a Walkman, and the iPhone has become the quintessential smartphone. Now the iPad has arrived in Japan, at last, but it is not being greeted with total joy. In fact, some Japanese consumers would like to re-enact that scene from 1984, but by throwing a hammer at iTunes instead.

In a country where newspapers are published twice a day, there's no doubt that Japanese people love reading. Just look at the huge consumption of manga. People of every class and age consume them in their everyday lives. But the profound relationship people have with physical paper in their everyday lives is changing, as more and more young people shift attention to their mobile phones.

They are not only consumers of books and manga on the phone; they are also using it as a platform to write and self-publish their own books. They have a lot to express and share. More and more of them are being awarded with official and prestigious literary prizes. These books are very popular, pushing mobile phone manufacturers to design certain models specifically for reading.

In a country where newspapers are published twice a day, there's no doubt that Japanese people love reading. But the profound relationship people have with physical paper in their everyday lives is changing

The movie and television industries are investing plenty into the area, too, adapting some of these stories for the big screen and TV.

Needless to say, the iPad launch was very much anticipated. Now I see many older people buying Apple's device, too, and this is where the iPad revolution comes in. You see, this older generation is not comfortable with computers, yet they navigate the tablet with ease. The shock comes when you talk to them. They are not aware they are actually using a computer. They are surprised how comfortable reading is on the iPad. But, again, not everyone is happy with the presence of the device. The iPad itself is not the issue, but the growing tension between iTunes and the manga industry.

According to an early estimate from publishers, more than 30 per cent of proposed manga releases have been rejected by Apple. The level of violence and mature content is targeted by iTunes, leaving many outside the iPad's doors in the cold. Some say that blood is a no-go, along with any suggestive silhouettes. In sharp contrast, the apparent freedom given to Marvel Comics is seen as a complete mystery and point of contention.

The fact is, many (often younger) artists are experimenting with the tablet and with self publishing, and a trend similar to digital books

on mobile phones is growing fast in the manga world. Some are already working with Amazon's Kindle reader. The hope was that one major platform would rise out of the pack in Japan so the industry could focus all its energies on it.

The iPad was seen as a major candidate, but it seems that, for now, it's not to be. As it currently stands, the iPad is allowing the competition to fill the vacant pole position in Japan's tablet race. While its Comics Reader on the PSP could use more attention, Sony hasn't announced alliances with many big, local names either – certainly not enough to deliver a Japanese solution for the iPad.

That Japanese tablet scene isn't just limited to reading, it's open to multiple – but so far underexposed – features: gaming for a start. In that respect, some are starting to see Nintendo's 3DS as a possible contender if it offers convincing reading comfort and storage capacity.

The Japanese market is not necessarily in search of a local initiative, and many are clearly fascinated by the iPad. But it is no secret they would like the device to more properly fulfil their everyday needs, such as manga. Publishers are dying to answer that call. They are not against a shift from paper to digital, as it would allow vital cost reduction (both in manufacturing and distribution), and enable them to reach a larger audience beyond Japanese shores.

However iTunes' restrictions are implemented, the iPad as Japan's primary tablet seems like a distant dream. That may have a big impact on the gaming future of the platform as well. Should another device become Japan's leading multipurpose digital wonder, would Japanese game makers keep supporting the iPad? Many developers feel lost, unsure. More and more are starting to look at the 3DS for its promise of potential beyond videogames on a new hardware device.

In the end, the country may be forced to choose a domestic alternative to Apple so people can enjoy the digital reading they need in their everyday lives. Once more, perhaps, we'll be lost somewhere in our own version of Galapagos syndrome.



Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales, June 7–July 4

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Inazuma Eleven 3*** (Level-5, DS): 462,377 (NE)
2. ***Super Mario Galaxy 2*** (Nintendo, Wii): 190,038 (643,760)
3. ***Love Plus +*** (Konami, DS): 141,836 (NE)
4. ***Xenoblade*** (Nintendo, Wii): 115,900 (NE)
5. ***GTA: Episodes From Liberty City*** (Take 2, PS3): 100,846 (NE)
6. ***Monster Hunter Frontier Online*** (Capcom, 360): 92,467 (NE)
7. ***Totori No Atelier*** (Gust, PS3): 86,189 (NE)
8. ***Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side: 3rd Story*** (Konami, DS): 81,087 (NE)
9. ***Taiko No Tatsujin DS: Dororon!*** (BNG, DS): 65,214 (NE)
10. ***BlazBlue: Continuum Shift*** (ASW, PS3): 45,954 (NE)

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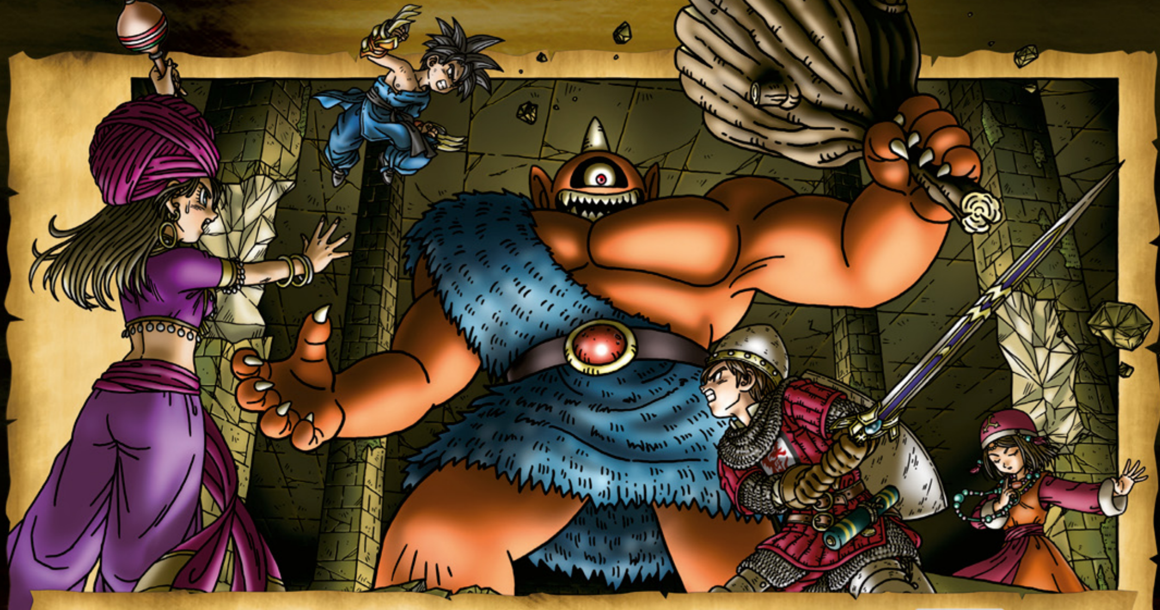
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KONAMI, 360, DS, PS3, PSP, WII

Professor Layton And The Unwound Future



A letter from the future? London in peril? Another Layton brain-teaser? With well over 100 new puzzles, a trip back in time may be required to salvage brain cells. Sign us up.
NINTENDO, DS

Portal 2



How do you improve an experience as complete as *Portal* seemed first time around? We're looking forward to cracking open a can of propulsion gel and finding out.
VALVE, 360, PC, PS3

Plastic fantastic

How the traditional controller's Moving on



Its glowing orb may make it seem a little too playful to cynical eyes, but the Move controller is a carefully tuned peripheral, its ergonomic styling making it instantly appealing to use

This month's cover star might be Kinect, but it coincides with receiving final Move controllers in the **Edge** office. And, away from the hubbub of press events and the eyes of PRs, Sony's motion controller turns out to be a very sophisticated piece of kit. Move is precise, responsive, and most importantly always knows where it is in 3D space, something unostentatious launch title *Tumble* (see p42) uses to great effect.

Reaching carefully into the screen in order to gently place a block is a far cry from waggling a controller to swipe a sword, but *Tumble* does something even better than that: it makes a case for holding something tangible in your hand. Haptic feedback grants the expected tactility, but it's *Tumble*'s visual representation of the controller within its gameworld that truly makes a difference: with every motion accurately reflected by the controller on the screen, you feel like you're holding something inside the game.

And it feels good in the hand. Whereas Nintendo sneaked its Wii into unsuspecting homes by designing something that looked like a TV remote, Move is more charismatic. Its sleek design fits neatly into the palm, and the cluster of satisfyingly clicky face buttons around the thumb-shaped 'Move' button (think the Wii Remote's 'A') mean Move should have no trouble satisfying the demands of more complex control schemes. The trigger will prove more divisive, however. It certainly improves upon the Sixaxis' slippery shoulder buttons, but the analogue sponginess makes it less satisfying in, say, an all-out shooter.

If Kinect's potential hinges on designers using the power of the technology to craft genuinely new experiences, then Move's depends on how well it can be used to enhance existing genres and games. The addition of Move controls to *Heavy Rain* doesn't fully convince, but it shows that an adventure game specifically built for the controller could be special. The number of easy-to-reach buttons across both the controller and its navigation controller sidekick also mean motion control could be subtly integrated into otherwise conventional games.

Microsoft's vision of gaming's future is tantalising and intimidating in equal measure. Sony's, meanwhile, is far easier to get to grips with.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **MERCURYSTEAM**
ORIGIN: **SPAIN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E207, E217**

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow

Under a killing moon, and with a savage howl, Konami's series returns to 3D



Early impressions show a dedication to telling the dark fantasy story the team has concocted. We're expecting to strain our eye-rolling muscles at the cheesy one-liners



Having grabbed one of the pack, it's a waiting game until the circles line up and you can exact a finishing blow. The villagers helping you are toothpicks for the werewolves



The rich tones of Patrick Stewart are your first introduction to the new *Castlevania*, brought back from the graveyard of 3D franchise misfires by MercurySteam. The Madrid-based developer, whose thirdperson action adventure pitch won over Kojima Productions, has embraced the theatricality of the series' premise and delved head first into the lore of castles and overgrown canines. The developer may not have much of a track record (*American McGee's Scrapland* and *Clive Barker's Jericho* are the studio's other high-profile gigs), but there's certainly a glimmer of hope in the hands-on time we've experienced with Gabriel and his Combat Cross.

It's the most visually arresting 3D *Castlevania* to date (admittedly not a difficult box to tick), and the opening section in particular has grim, Gothic mood lighting that adds atmosphere to the button-bashing that ensues. Gabriel's whip-cracks ignite the scene around him and keep things crisp and clear in the shifting shadows, the proprietary engine showing off particle effects that dazzle but never daze or confuse.

> It's the most visually arresting 3D Castlevania to date, and the opening section in particular has grim, Gothic mood lighting that adds atmosphere to the button-bashing

The fantasy may have a higher production spin than previous 3D entries, but the steep difficulty will be familiar to fans. Health is replenished only at fountains, set within each battleground, and makes combat a war of attrition with your animal foes. They're a rabid bunch in the opening levels, werewolves with red eyes who want nothing more than a Gabriel chow mein. Fortunately, the weapons at your disposal are up to the challenge, with the whip a far-reaching life-saver that buys time and space. Dodging and blocking are crucial to out-performing the bigger enemies, and throwing daggers provide a further, familiar avenue for distancing yourself from the packs. Grabs are also a core component, initiated with a tap of R2 which triggers a set of converging circles that, once overlapping, require a button press to deliver that killing blow. It's a subtle, simple approach to QTE that breaks up the furious lashings.

Mid-air combos are a major component: juggling the bestial 'wargs' buys crucial time away from the dangers on the ground but if your timing's off, be prepared for retaliation. The AI is just the right side of dumb to allow manipulation, while their attacks are given adequate radius to keep you on your toes. The simple whip-cracking combat of the 2D series is gone, but there's enough familiarity – candle-whipping is promised – that fans won't feel alienated by the more aggressive approach. And if they do feel overwhelmed by all the messy blood-letting, at least MercurySteam has built in the same collect and reward system that makes *Castlevania* such an obsessive-compulsive draw. Item collection and skill upgrading is a heavy presence, and hopefully MercurySteam's castle maps will offer the intricacy and trickery of their 2D relations.

Camera control was one of many nails in *Castlevania 64*'s coffin, and here the right

The forest chase introduces a touch of saddleback velocity into the mix, but the appeal doesn't take long to wear thin



Cracking the scripted whip

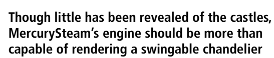
Combat is sharp and snappy, but the initial showdown in a medieval village takes just moments to step into scripted territory. As the king warg makes his suitably grand entrance, mauling peasants and showing off his fangs, it's Belmont's job to rein in the irritable beast. Blocking is useless against the mini-boss and it's crucial to time dodges to evade certain death. There's a strategy involved in timing your escapes and diving in, then retreating to top up health at the fountain, that removes the fight from mundane button-bashing. To finish, a scripted scene kicks in that requires a timed button-press to impale the creature on a convenient wooden stake.

analogue stick is so far redundant, with a fixed camera taking in all the action from a high-angle vantage point. It's a choice of perspective that keeps all eyes on the action – though much of the environment's beauty flashes by.

More worrying for the faithful is the on-rails horseback section that occurs straight after your opening skirmish. Preceded by an allusion to a love lost, the scene kicks off with an ethereal white horse emerging from the void and giving Gabriel a good talking to. Mounting your steed, it's time to gallop forth and slash sideways. It's a concession to varying the pace that *Castlevania* has never felt the need for before. The horseback duel demands timed inputs in order to stave off hijack attempts. Conversely, there are prompts to repay the favour and do away with foes – and steeds – by a swift leap of faith and a sharp stab of metal. Takedowns are brutal and grand, with a theatricality that wouldn't look out of place in a *God Of War* showdown. If you're unfortunate enough to be victimised by the odds there's a chance for redemption, and revenge, in the walled in hack'n'slash scenarios offered up before your journey to the iconic castles (plural this time) resumes.

The *Castlevania* series has been at this junction before, on the precipice of a 3D translation that has all the mythology along with the right moves. The difference this time is that cues have been taken from the thirdperson action genre at large, hopefully meaning this will be a more rounded, accessible and ultimately deeper adventure in the third dimension than we've been offered before.





Though little has been revealed of the castles, MercurySteam's engine should be more than capable of rendering a swingable chandelier





FORMAT: **360, PS3, PC**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2011**

Dirt 3

The Americans are coming, and they're bringing doughnuts





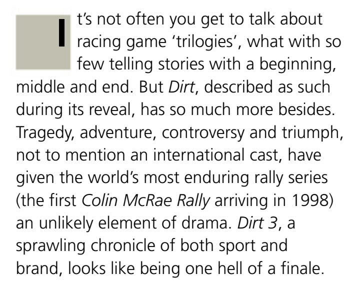


Players start the new career mode as a privateer racing "cars from the '90s that still have a place in people's hearts". Moving on from *Dirt 2*'s battle of the egos, it places a renewed emphasis on working and racing within a team

It's not often you get to talk about racing game 'trilogies', what with so few telling stories with a beginning, middle and end. But *Dirt*, described as such during its reveal, has so much more besides. Tragedy, adventure, controversy and triumph, not to mention an international cast, have given the world's most enduring rally series (the first *Colin McRae Rally* arriving in 1998) an unlikely element of drama. *Dirt 3*, a sprawling chronicle of both sport and brand, looks like being one hell of a finale.

'The king of action sports racing', begins a trailer that reels off one marquee feature after another. Snow and ice, dynamic weather, YouTube uploads, 'fierce rides and epic tracks', splitscreen support, party modes, an open-world playground and more real-life sponsors and stars than ever. "The US has joined the party," says chief game designer **Matt Horsman**. "This is the biggest rally game ever made."

And it has to be. In its divisive play to the emerging US market, *Dirt* has exposed the split personality of modern rally. Tugged between Nitro Circus (Travis Pastrana's awkward mix of Jackass and Evel Knievel), the X-Games, the online antics of Ken Block,





the long-distance road rallies of the Golden Era and the far reaches of the WRC, it's a sport with more than just its technology in a spin. Adequately covering it without someone accusing you of betrayal is, as previous *Dirt*s have discovered, getting more difficult every year.

"Obviously, there was a conscious effort to break in to more markets," admits executive producer **Clive Moody**. "*McRae* of old was a very Euro-centric game. It was good to Codemasters and good to us, but we had to diversify a little bit. Pure rally is a hard sell for the US audience: they don't get it. Its appeal is broadening from that point of view, but we wanted to do more than just a straight point-to-point rally game anyway. It's exciting for the player not to feel like they're just having one experience. Are we trying to keep two different sets of people happy? Yes, to an extent.

"The Americanisation is something we hear a lot, but I think we've got bang-on balance with *Dirt 3* in terms of voiceover and narrative. Yes, you'll hear some US voices, but there'll be European voices as well. The emphasis in the game is all about the team that supports you, and there's a mixture. Deliberately so, to give balance and flavour and variety."

News that Ken Block owns a "bigger piece of the pie" this time has to be taken in context. For one thing, Horsman admits that *Dirt 2* was a "teenager's idea" of what the US superstar's life would be like, particularly in its presentation. *Dirt 3* will be different, sharing some of the 'live the life' concepts of stablemate *F1 2010*. And when the pie itself is so colossal, the size of the portions seems trivial. Promising 100 routes next to the previous game's 41, it stretches from the alpine regions of Norway, Aspen and Monte Carlo to the widescreen plains of Africa and the world's most exotic, extreme locations.

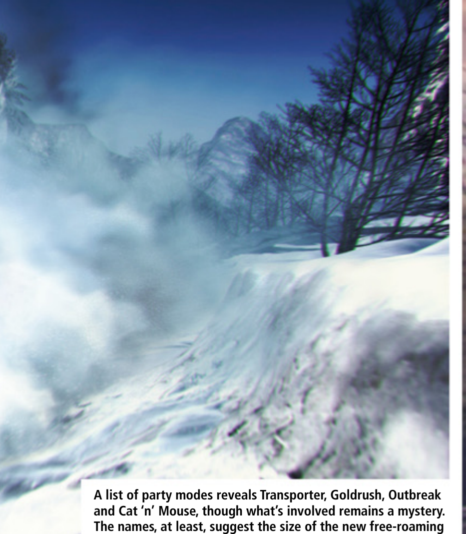
A 'definitive' selection of cars, meanwhile, includes the modern (WRC, Open class and Super 2000), classic (Group B and legends like the Morris Cooper), fearless (super buggies and RAID trucks) and chic (Rallycross, Gymkhana and Trailblazer). Separated behind the scenes by over 400 parameters, they boast more detailed weight-shifting than before, introducing active dampeners and fast-rebound suspension. Tyre choice is critical, not least on tracks that veer back and forth between snow, slush and tarmac.

By embracing the equestrian-style Gymkhana, though, the game does owe Block its biggest new feature. For those who

"We wanted to do more than a straight point-to-point rally game anyway. It's exciting for the player not to feel like they're just having one experience"



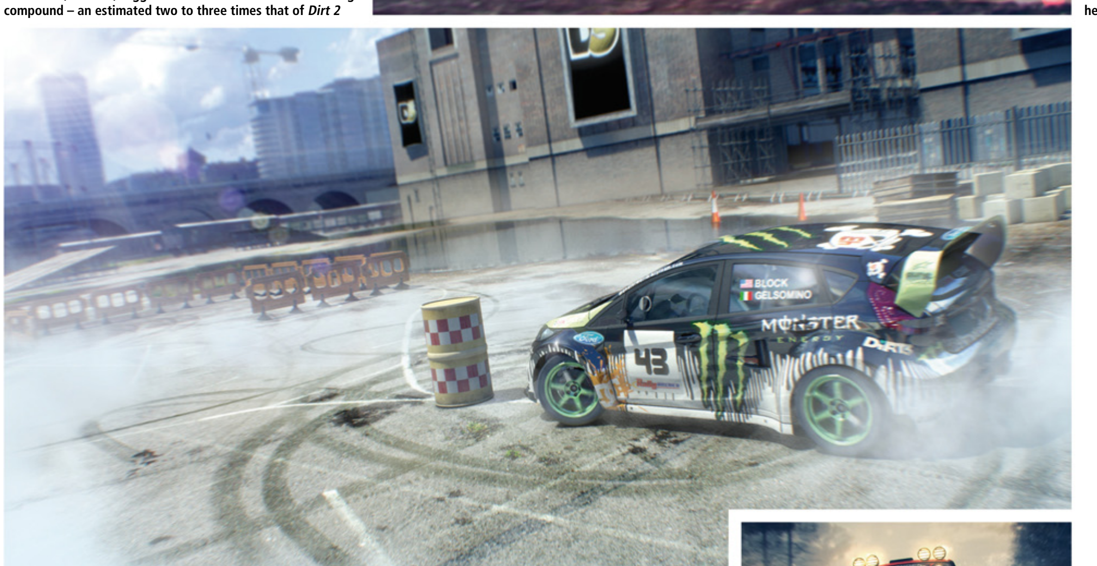
Visiting custom-built locations such as Monaco and the LA Coliseum, the new Gymkhana modes support competitive and freestyle events



A list of party modes reveals Transporter, Goldrush, Outbreak and Cat 'n' Mouse, though what's involved remains a mystery. The names, at least, suggest the size of the new free-roaming compound – an estimated two to three times that of *Dirt 2*

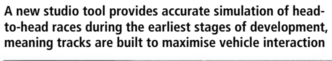


The Ego engine's lighting system has improved considerably, the old ambient occlusion method tweaked to allow greater light from the road surface. Fewer details are crushed by shadow, then, while deferred headlights will colour any nearby surfaces



Menu driven

The festival atmosphere and firstperson vantage of *Dirt 2*'s frontend are gone, replaced by a more stylised trip through the wider world of rally. An early version applies such intense shader effects to the Battersea venue that it could pass for pen and ink, swooping between angles as you flick between the options. Racing into the foreground is the player's current car, which in the final version will crash through abstract objects and particle effects as it struggles to keep up. No sign yet of the new HUD, the current build using the old *Dirt 2* one. Expect something a little more straightforward, no doubt peppered with player stats and Achievement progress.



A new studio tool provides accurate simulation of head-to-head races during the earliest stages of development, meaning tracks are built to maximise vehicle interaction

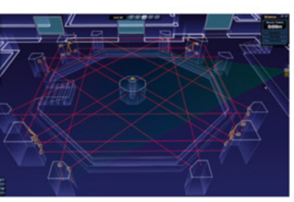
missed him shake the life into Top Gear's James May with a YouTube-conquering onslaught of doughnuts, drifts and near-misses, this revived discipline is just the kind of vulgar, stupefying spectacle to crack not just the US market open, but an entire generation bred on extreme sports clips and MTV. Converting its Battersea circuit into a vast free-roaming stunt compound, *Dirt 3* lets you trim your replays and upload them, like Block, to YouTube. A combo system looks closely at the gaps between car and obstacles, frowning upon exploits like snaking to keep up your multiplier.

More than balance, flavour and variety, the word for all this is agility. Stylistically and geographically, *Dirt 3* has a world to travel, begging the question of what baggage it needs to shed. *Dirt 2*'s laborious frontend? "We've had that feedback," nods Moody. "It was something we were aware of but we didn't want to break that immersive feeling. The concepts we've got for this game's UI [see 'Menu driven'] will fix a lot of those issues. It's got to be snappier but without losing the cool, and without taking you out of the game. I don't believe there's anyone out there who puts the same amount of love into their UIs as we do. It's the first thing the player experiences when they enter the game, so it's important to get them off on the right foot, to set that quality bar high."

As for manoeuvrability, the changes should become clearer with time. Today, the team is keen to show off the latest force feedback and how it reflects greater simulation of understeer and oversteer, required by the dynamic weather types, new tyres and quirky historic handling models. Such attention to detail, insists Codemasters, is rivalled only by its commitment to the fans.



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **INTROVERSION**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**





The best laid plans of mice and men often end in horrific massacres, as the saying goes. The skillsets of your men encourages you to get in and out without being detected, however. Shooting people to pieces is likely to make a clean getaway even trickier to achieve

Subversion

A well-planned heist that's as much about hi-tech as hold-ups

"Some people are young enough to believe that Mission: Impossible is a series of fairly poor Tom Cruise films," says Introversion's creative head **Chris Delay** as he talks about the inspiration for his company's latest game. "This is not true. Mission: Impossible is actually one of the best TV series ever made – a hi-tech group of American agents would infiltrate Russian or Mafia organisations and take them down from the inside. Not once did a member of the Mission: Impossible team wield two guns, diving in slow motion while firing."

Nor do your team in *Subversion*, a hi-tech heist game operated with cold tactical abstraction through an architectural blueprint. And it's no less exciting for it. Delay's demonstration sees him rob a bank with a team of three agents, hoping to loot and scoot before anyone realises they were there. Shooting is very much the fall-back plan. Instead, Delay uses his agents' varying skills in concert to tackle the bank's multiple security systems from all sides: sneaking, hacking, tricking, tapping and sabotaging.

As an agent is sent round the back, the blueprint's detail expands and, using a wall-scanning device, Delay is able to illuminate some of the building's interior. A toilet block and a server room fade into view.

"That's the kind of room we want to get into to start monkeying around with the security systems," says Delay. "I can also see what's almost certainly the telephone junction box for the entire building. If I had a guy who was skilled in electrical engineering, I could start analysing these telephone lines, isolate which phones they are connected to, and start redirecting 999 calls."

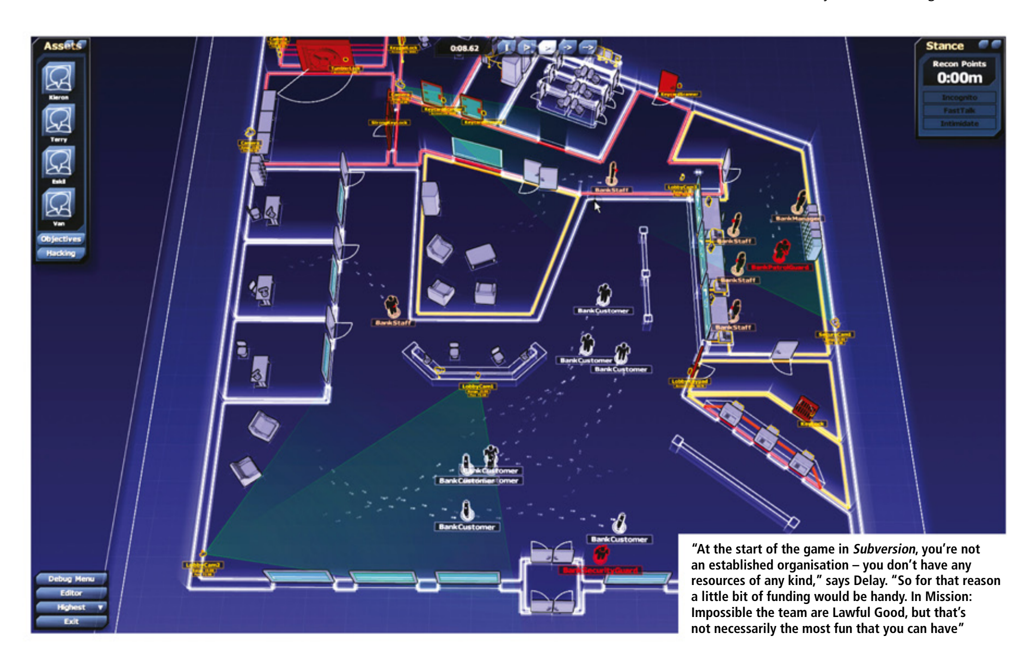
Meanwhile, Delay's coordinating his two other agents, pausing the game to queue up commands. Scouting the lobby, they observe an armed guard, cash machines and a code-locked door. A member of bank staff walks through it, giving Delay the opportunity to tailgate. Delay activates his agent's Incognito and Fast-talking skills, which make him less conspicuous in the staff-only area. Nonetheless, a suspicious security guard gives the agent a good long look. Tense seconds pass before the guard is placated by his patter and wanders off.

To avoid the guard creeping up on him again, Delay has the agent tap a security camera. While parts of the building you've explored remain visible, the people in it will fade from view if they aren't currently in your line of sight – tapping the camera means Delay will spot staff members passing through its field of vision, effectively giving him another set of eyes to keep track of the emerging situation. With his back covered, the agent drills out the lock on the door to the cash machines and empties them – the drills are silenced with foam rubber, in true Mission: Impossible tradition, Delay explains.

But there's still the main prize: the vault. The agent tiptoes behind the tellers, tranquillises a security guard and drags him into the toilets, only to find that the cage between him and the vault door is impassable without a key. It's time to get unsubtle. In a coordinated move, he holds up the bank tellers while the other two agents pull guns in the lobby. Once suitably intimated, civilians can be directly controlled and herded into a corner. Guards take a bit

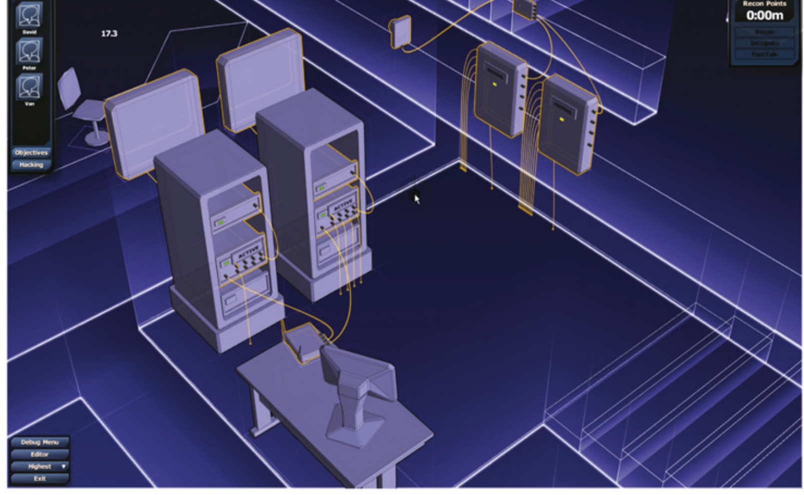


With the door finally open the team makes a hurried exit, piling into the van with 4.2 million in cash and five seconds to spare before the boys in blue arrive

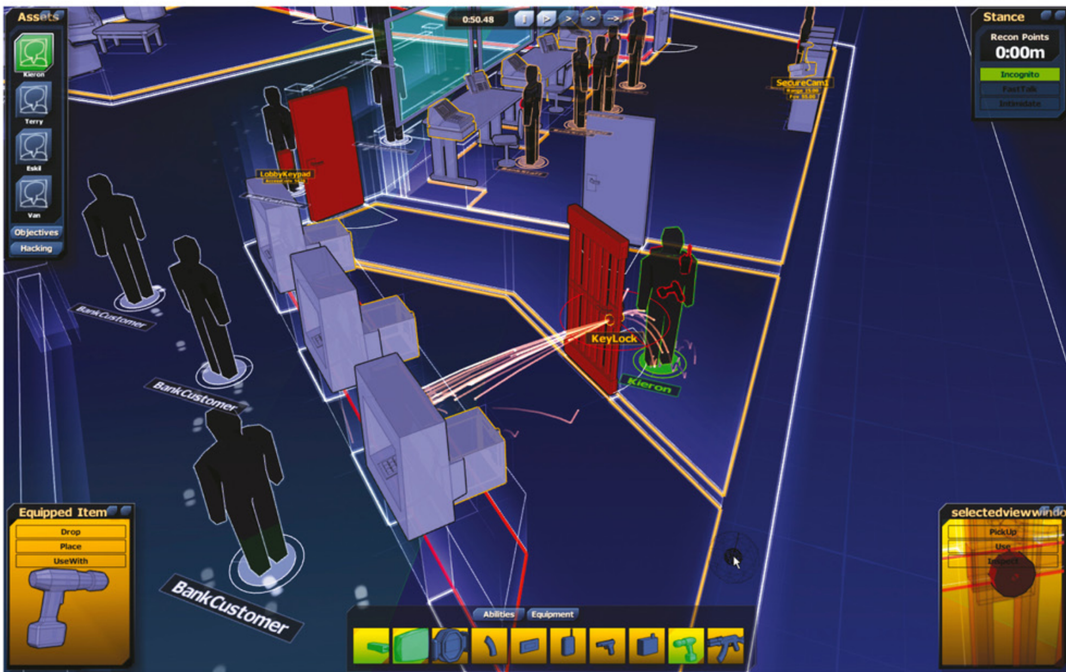


"At the start of the game in *Subversion*, you're not an established organisation – you don't have any resources of any kind," says Delay. "So for that reason a little bit of funding would be handy. In Mission: Impossible the team are Lawful Good, but that's not necessarily the most fun that you can have"

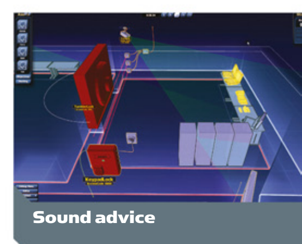




We're eager to know what Introversion's plan is for the game as a whole. Will the procedurally generated city be navigable at the level of detail seen in this demo, or will it be an interface to select your next target?



The level of abstraction allows *Subversion* to do things that are mechanically interesting but would look wrong in greater fidelity. For example, it's easier to explain a guard's indifference to a Fast-talking agent when the interaction is displayed with such simplicity



Sound advice

With the cage open, Delay places a listening device on the vault, turning the dial on the tumbler lock to hear when one of the pins falls. A larger spike in the sound wave indicates that the right number has been found, and Delay spins the dial back the other way to find the next. "It doesn't work yet, but I personally want to have this thing recording all the sound around you at massively maximised volume as well," Delay explains. "So if someone does fire a gun around you while you're doing this, your agent will go permanently deaf."

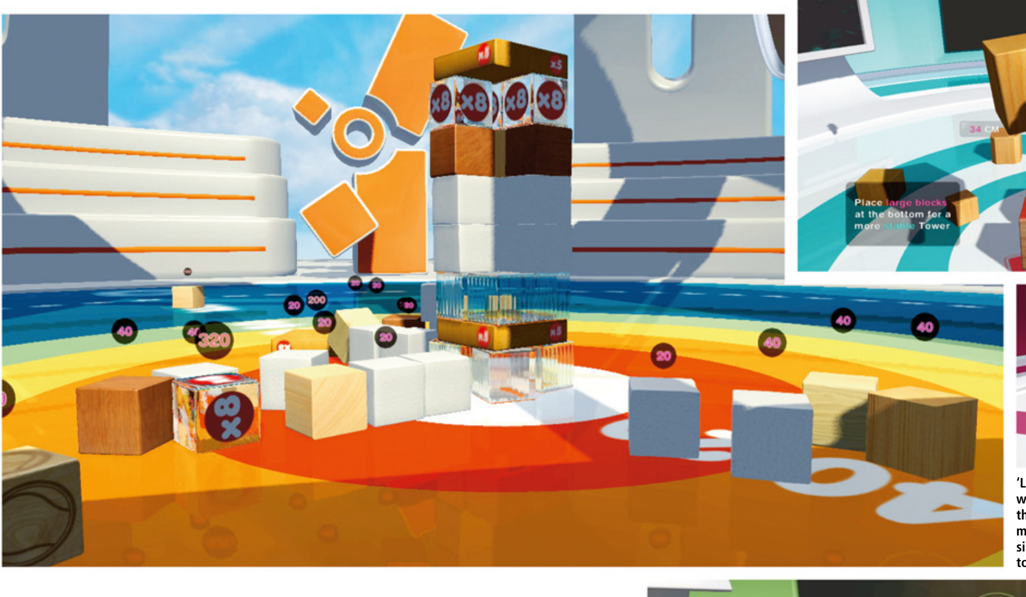
more encouragement before they surrender. A shot in the arm and leg does the trick, and with the lobby under control Delay orders the bank manager to open the cage.

It doesn't all go smoothly – a careless foot trips a laser in the vault and a master alarm threatens to bring the heat in less than two minutes. Worse still, Delay's earlier opportunism comes back to haunt him: because he slipped through the first security door behind a member of staff, he doesn't actually have the keycode to open it. Fortunately, one of his crew in the lobby has a hacking tool, and sets about deciphering the code as the clock ticks down. With the door finally open, the team makes a hurried exit, piling into the van with 4.2 million in cash and five seconds to spare before the boys in blue arrive.

What would happen if they did arrive is unclear, even to the developers. Delay vaguely alludes to the possibility of a car chase, but it's clear that there's really no certainty at all as to how the heist will fit in to the larger game. Presumably Introversion is keen to make use of the procedural city generation technology seen in earlier teases for the game – but how free you are to roam this at the scale seen in our demonstration is something yet to be determined. Delay stresses that everything we've seen is experimental. No one feature described above is certain to be in the final product, and the demo is full of programmer art and placeholder images. But what is already apparent is how complex and dynamic the interaction of these systems is, and how slickly they can be manipulated. Introversion knows that, as with any masterplan, the devil's in the details.



"You don't always know if the guards are going to come at you or surrender," says Delay as his agents wave AKs around the lobby. You can shoot them to disarm and disable them, choosing individual limbs





'Limbo' challenges involve placing blocks on a platform while avoiding stacking them over a certain height – lest the black bar which floats across the screen after every move knocks them to the ground (below). But it's the simple puzzle challenges (above) that are the hardest to solve: no bronze medals for a third-rate effort here

Tumble

A blocky puzzler that offers a surprising amount of depth

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **SUPERMASSIVE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**



Tumble could be the *Wii Sports* of the Move launch games. Yes, there's *Sports Champions*, doing its best to ape and outdo Nintendo's game, and yes, *Tumble* is about building towers out of blocks, and therefore not quite as packed with mainstream appeal. But if *Wii Sports*' success lay in showing players exactly what the Wii Remote could do, then *Tumble* is the game which does the same for Sony's motion-sensing controller.

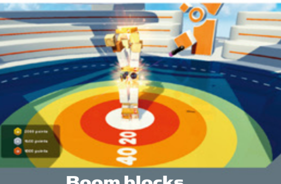
It's the precision. Stacking boxes in *Tumble*'s 'build 'em high' challenges is pretty straightforward, but even then the controller's ability to sense depth produces a fine sense of reaching into the screen in order to put a block down. Minute alterations in the angle of your wrist are replicated onscreen – essential for slotting blocks together, *Tetris* style – and a gentle flick reorients the block currently in your grasp. If loading up Wii Tennis for the first time led to several minutes of playful swiping and waving, your first experience of *Tumble* will have you equally impressed while making much less substantial motions of the hand.

The decision to have the controller visually represented within the game is key. In a less abstract game it would be dislocating, but here it functions as a point of connection between you and the blocks you grab with a squeeze of the controller's trigger.

Tumble is competent and polished – almost to the point of sterility. Fun challenges, like squeezing as many awkwardly shaped blocks on to a tiny platform as possible, or blowing Jenga-esque towers to pieces (see 'Boom blocks'), are all introduced by a calm, placid female voice that sounds more like a lightly drugged yoga instructor than a videogame announcer. *Tumble*'s presentation doesn't hurt the experience, and it will certainly be a gentle introduction for novices, but we wonder if someone has forgotten that playing with blocks is usually a kid-friendly pursuit.

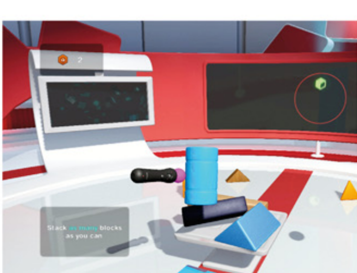
Levels are divided across a series of zones, and each contains a selection of medals of the gold, silver and bronze variety – the higher you build the tower, or the more blocks you fit on the platform, the better a medal you receive. Occasionally, levels will offer a more confounding, one-shot challenge. One level – which has us stumped – involves a reasonably low goal height but requires the balancing of two awkwardly shaped blocks which just refuse to stand up straight, no matter how we place them.

Tumble's potential as a puzzler will ensure its long-term appeal. The introductory levels we've played are brilliant, understated demonstrations of the power of the Move controller, but if *Tumble* can serve up challenge and variety with its spatial-reasoning puzzles beyond the gentle opening stages, it has the potential to be much more than just a novelty.



Boom blocks

Destruction challenges are the cathartic antidote to the patient and precise motions required by the majority of *Tumble*'s levels. The level we play requires three limpet mines to be attached to the side of a tower. When detonated, the player's score depends upon the distribution of fallen blocks across the giant target pad the now devastated tower once stood in the centre of. How later destruction levels will vary the concept is unclear, but after spending ten minutes patiently building a tower beforehand, there's a satisfying thrill in knocking one down.





The different materials objects are made from affects play – heavy yet slippery plastic is less reliable a foundation than solid, dependable wood, for example

The Shoot

Lights, camera and a lot of action in Move's lightgun premiere

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **COHORT STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2010**

Whereas the rest of Move's launch line-up appears to have been designed to show off as much of the controller's precise gesture tracking as possible, *The Shoot* is built around Move's more familiar features – you point at the screen, and you shoot. The things you shoot at are enemies drawn from one of five classic movie-set themes (each set is further divided into a series of 'scenes'). Our demo takes place in a science-fiction-themed set, with robots taking hostages on the New York subway and, in a slight diversion from convention, robbing a bank.



***The Shoot*'s levels and enemies riff inevitably on Hollywood's recent output. This thieving machine goes by the name Robotimus Prime, which sounds familiar**

The Shoot is the visual standout of Move's launch games, its crisp cardboard cutout foes exploding in gorgeous showers of bright blue sparks. Certainly, players used to satisfying an itchy trigger finger via Wii's library of lightgun titles won't help but notice the upgrade.

Shooting works well, but isn't as demonstrative of the advantages of Move's precision as is dodging enemy rockets (move the controller from side to side) or activating special attacks – only one of which, the slow-motion-granting Showtime, was available when we played, activated by spinning around on the spot. One clever touch was finishing off defeated bosses by 'quick-drawing' the controller – sure to feel even better on the western-flavoured sets.

Also of note was bonus mode Robotosphere. Here, by holding the Move button, players spin a sphere dotted with various targets in order to access and shoot matching pairs. While Robotosphere offers a less gimmicky blend of gesture control and traditional shooting than the main game, *The Shoot* as a whole feels less a showcase for the potential of the Move controller and more a polished and action-packed attempt to round out its line-up for launch.

Bonuses – and power-ups – are awarded in return for chains of kills. The director, whose satisfaction level represents your health, constantly expresses his approval (or disapproval) as you play



Kung Fu Rider

Pull up a seat for Sony's extreme office chair ride through Tokyo

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**

Without doubt the most idiosyncratic title in Sony's Move line-up, *Kung Fu Rider* sees hapless Tokyo-based private detective Tobin fleeing the city (and the angry Yakuza thugs it's inevitably filled with) on a selection of unlikely steeds including its centrepiece mount – a generic office wheelie chair.

The game wastes no time in setting up its bonkers premise, and (in our demo at least) knows exactly where a story belongs in a game like this: back at the start screen. Tobin and his assistant Karin hide behind the opening menus, berating each other for the botched job which has led to their pursuit by a group of well-dressed thugs.

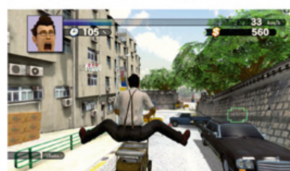
Guiding Tobin on his office-furniture-aided escape from the city is both an effective showcase for the potential of the Move controller and a reminder that, when it comes to motion controls, developers must be judicious in applying them. Standard acceleration is performed by gently waving the controller to simulate Tobin pushing off the ground, but with steering, jumping, some attacks and Tobin's powered-up boost move all mapped to motion gestures of their own, things can get confusing fairly quickly. You will – inevitably – jump when you intend to accelerate, and while the technology behind Move can distinguish between the two motions, whether you'll be able to when hurtling through a Tokyo market on a chair is a different matter.

Hurtling through a Tokyo market on a chair is fun, however. The game's leaping and grinding manoeuvres show the influence of skating titles on Tobin's downhill flight, whereas the presence of obstacles to be ducked under and staff-wielding Yakuza types to be similarly avoided – or taken out with special attacks – makes riding through the streets rather frantic. If more time spent with the title will lead to mastery of its complex-seeming controls, then *Kung Fu Rider* could yet be a surprising demonstration of Move's potential.



The clash between the game's cockney English voiceover and its self-conscious Japanese styling adds an extra layer of weirdness. "Come 'ere, my son," Tobin exclaims on seeing his office chair, followed by a countdown in chirpy Japanese



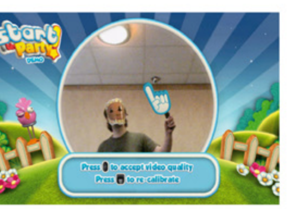


Only Tobin was playable in our demo, though Karin will have her own levels in the full game – taking a dignified side-saddle approach to office chair riding

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **SUPERMASSIVE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2010**

Start The Party

Squash the bugs, shoot the ghosts, but save the birds at this party



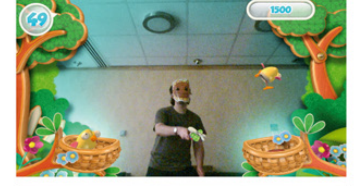
Of all the games in Move's launch line-up, it's *Start The Party* which highlights most explicitly the ancestry of the technology – on the PlayStation Eye side of the family, at least. *Start The Party* is a minigame compilation reminiscent of *EyeToy: Play*, and one which makes neat use of the motion-sensing tech.

Start The Party's gimmick, and it's a clever one, is that it uses the PlayStation Eye to transform the Move controller into whatever object the game you're playing requires. Calibrating the controller makes an oversized foam hand appear where there was merely a sphere of light before, and waggling the wand around results in it inflating to epic proportions.

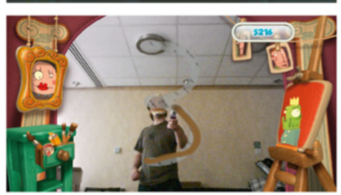
The minigame which makes the most playful use of the controller would have to be Spooky Shootout, which turns the controller into a flashlight necessary to pick out ghosts lurking in the dark. On occasion, an invincible purple ghost will wander across the screen, and players are required to cover up the light in order to hide from it.

We also played Picture This, a paint-by-numbers game requiring players to colour in a series of shapes with their suddenly-transformed-into-a-paintbrush controller. Once the round was over, the shapes are revealed to have been the component parts of a (rather scruffy looking in our case) doodle of bird. Other games turned the controller into a fan used to blow falling chicks safely into nests, and a fly swatter used as you'd expect (this game, Bug Bash, felt less accurate than the other offerings, perhaps due to its hectic pace).

In all, *Start The Party*'s selection of minigames, with their playful attitude towards the controller in your hand, serve as a reminder of what Sony's sophisticated piece of motion-sensing kit also happens to be: a very fun toy.







Picture This requires steady hands. Players control the thickness of the brush stroke by depressing the Move controller's trigger to varying degrees, and need to fill in as much of a shape as possible within a tight time limit



Bug Bash requires players to squish green insects while avoiding the explosive red ones. As the bat increases in size during a round, not hitting the latter becomes increasingly difficult

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2010**

Sports Champions

Sony makes a sophisticated, motion-controlled grab for Wii Sports' crown

Everything you need to know about Sony's and Nintendo's differing approaches to a sports compilation – and even, dare we say, the philosophies behind the Wii and Move projects – you can tell by taking one look at *Sports Champions*' characters. The glossy, pampered stars of our demo are sleek, beautiful creatures unafraid to look a hi-def camera straight in the eye, a far cry from crude but charming Miis.

Whereas *Wii Sports*, and even the MotionPlus-powered *Resort*, happily sacrifice wholly accurate representations in pursuit of easily accessible fun, the philosophy of precise control which lies at the heart of Move is evident here. Once a game of table tennis starts – and your well-toned character fades away to give an unobstructed view of the table – the controls don't just feel accurate, they feel natural. Again, the controller's ability to sense depth is crucial – move towards or away from the screen and your racquet will do the same. So precise is Move's ability to track the controller's position that you aren't always required to 'gesture' at all: hold the racquet in place for a drop shot and the ball will bounce off as gently as you'd expect it to.

Disc golf, while equally polished and well presented, feels less of a showcase for the merits of Move. Throwing the disc – by holding down and then releasing the trigger at the end of your throw – works well, but inherently lacks the precise satisfaction of perfectly judging the spin of a backhand return. *Sports Champions*' other games, including volleyball and gladiator duels, were unavailable in our code but, if they provide accurate thrills to rival table tennis, these perfectly white-toothed stars will have something to smile about.



The visual cues which highlight the path of a returned table tennis ball through the air are a useful tool – the challenge lies not so much in returning a shot as ensuring your opponent is unable to do the same in a game that offers constant back-and-forth play



Disc golf feels a more natural fit for the controller than its club-based cousin, and offers a more sedate challenge

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Heavy Rain: Move Edition

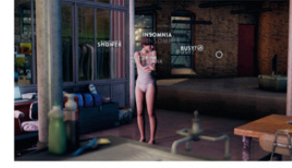
An interface update gives PS3 owners another opportunity to get sopping wet

With the majority of Move's launch line-up designed to showcase how the technology can be used to create games built entirely around the controller, it falls to previously released titles *Heavy Rain* and *EyePet* to show how Sony's tech can be used to enhance existing experiences. While far from traditional, it's *Heavy Rain* which best hints at the way Move might best be applied to more typical games. Due to be released as a free software update for those who already own the title, and to appear on the shop floor as a new special edition for those who don't, Quantic Dream's adventure is the only Move game we've played so far that uses the sub-controller for navigation.

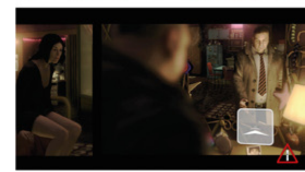
Rather than have key decisions on face buttons, players now use a relatively slow pointer. Move makes a balance between gestures and traditional controls possible, but *Heavy Rain* could benefit from more judicious application

The results are intriguing, but mixed. Much enhanced are *Heavy Rain*'s action sequences – we played through Shelby's apartment fight scene as well as the late-night attack on Madison Paige. While *Heavy Rain*'s take on QTEs is polished, Move improves them further. The intensity of swinging a lamp into the face of an attacker or frantically batting away their blows is easier to feel when you're required to act out the motions yourself. It's frustrating, however, to fail a QTE not because of slow reactions, but due to not being entirely certain which motions are required, as happened occasionally during our demo.

More intricate motions – taking out a wallet and throwing money on a table, or knocking on a door – can be awkward at first, too. Problems arise from actions being chopped into chunks – you raise your arm and then push forward to knock, which surely motion control should make possible with one fluid action. When they work, though, *Heavy Rain*'s enhanced controls bode well for future slices of interactive drama built with Move in mind.







The slight fuzziness of gestures suits the scrappy, desperate nature of *Heavy Rain*'s fight scenes perfectly, and removes some of the abstraction QTEs can throw up

EyePet: Move Edition

Sony ensures its little primate pets aren't left behind during the Move

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **SCE LONDON**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**

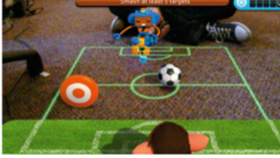
***E**yePet*'s original release saw a charming concept undermined by the limits of the technology. For all the fun to be had playing with a furry little friend, there was the frustration of gestures not being interpreted clearly, or the (rather clever) 'magic card' which controlled in-game items not functioning when positioned at the wrong angle.

The Move edition swaps the card for the Move controller, and benefits greatly from the upgrade. The ability to track the controller, whatever angle it's held at, makes the various tasks and activities noticeably easier to perform, and enhances the game's augmented reality approach by giving the magnifying glasses, fishing nets and other assorted contraptions an actual handle.

The game, however, is fundamentally unchanged. A nod to videogame convention can be found in the daily programme of activities and tests players are encouraged to perform in order to improve their pet's health (which can be checked by turning the controller into a blinking X-ray machine), but these features are merely a superficial imposition of structure on an experience which doesn't necessarily need one.

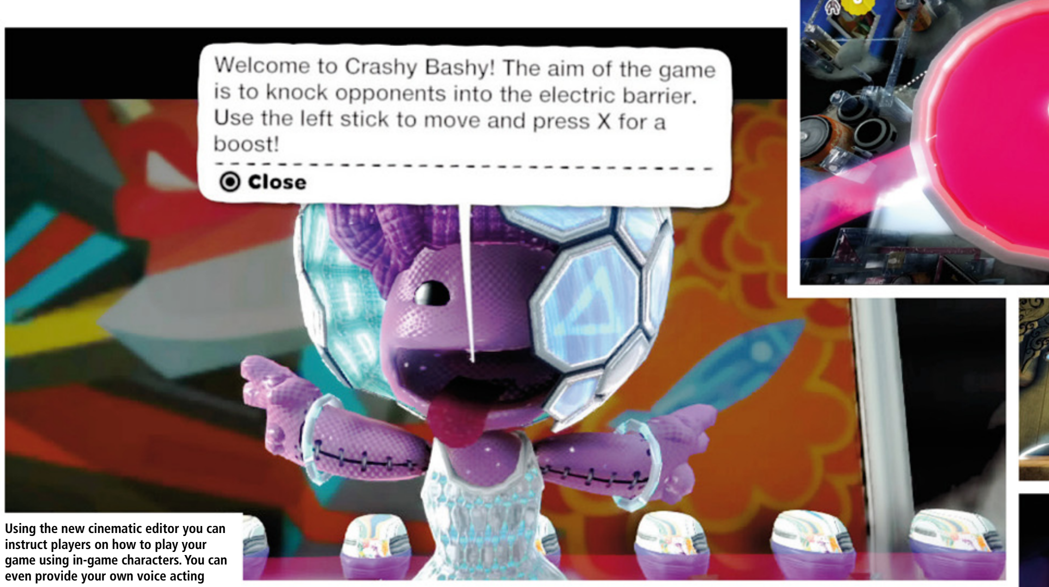
The simple magic of interacting with a creature that isn't there – and yet is – gives *EyePet* a charm which allows you to forgive its more frustrating moments, almost all of which arise from your pet seemingly not responding to gestures or spoken commands. Move has minimised these frustrations, but they still occur, and we wonder if *Eyepet*'s young target audience will be less likely to notice the slightly fussy interaction than a seasoned gamer, or more likely to be frustrated by it.







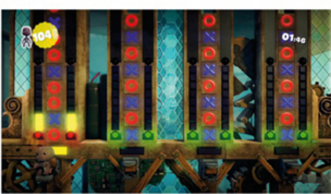
Fishing involves shouting at your pet as a fish swims past his side of the pool, then netting the tiddler it swipes into the air



Using the new cinematic editor you can instruct players on how to play your game using in-game characters. You can even provide your own voice acting







Super Block Racer is a rudimentary example of a rhythm-action game, programmed entirely using *LBP2*'s new microchip tool, which makes it possible to hide any clever inner workings from the view of the player

LittleBigPlanet 2

A hands-on session with some early fruits of Media Molecule's new creation tools

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **MEDIA MOLECULE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E215**



So, how do you make your own game in *LittleBigPlanet 2*? Three example creations originally revealed during Sony's E3 keynote presentation give a glimpse into the exciting potential of Media Molecule's smart new toolkit.

A major addition is camera placement. We're no longer limited to a side-on view and can look at our creation from any imaginable angle. One of the sample games, Crashy Bashy, is viewed from above, and the entire 'level' – a small, circular arena with electrified walls – is fixed in the centre of the screen. The goal is to nudge your opponents into the edges using a cute custom-made bumper car, and once we're off it's instantly knockabout in a way that needs no qualification. The various ways you can place the camera are still under wraps, but we've heard that you'll be able to create a thirdperson game by placing it behind Sackboy.

Crashy Bashy also uses the new 'competitive' level type. This gives each player (up to four in co-op) a score, and you determine the source of the points. In Crashy Bashy a player scores for shunting another player to their doom, but that's just one way of using it to give meaning to your mechanics.

In Rocket Funland, another sample level, points are awarded for blowing up your opponents with rockets. The rocket launcher isn't a pre-made tool (*LittleBigPlanet* just isn't that cruel) but jury-rigged from a new gadget, the Creatinator. This is a hat for Sackboy from which you can spawn any object, at any velocity or angle, with a tap of R1. In this case it's rockets, but it can be anything you've unlocked or created. We're not quite sure if that means you can shoot trucks at each other, but you've got to hope that it'll be possible.

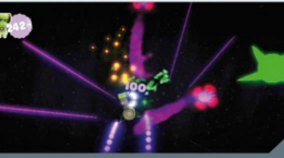
Rocket Funland also showcases the small matter of gravity, another new variable. You can lower or raise the gravity of your level, simulating a spacewalk and tweaking the height of your jumps.



According to Media Molecule's Alex Evans, this small, low-gravity arena battle can be created in as little as 20 minutes using the most basic tools

These creations still involve Sackboys moving around in a physical space, but that isn't necessarily a requirement this time around, as illustrated by the final game, Super Block Race, which sees Sony's adopted mascot pushed to the bottom of the screen, sitting in one of the new Direct Control Seats which let you map DualShock 3 controls to your creations. With four pillars of blue Xs and red Os in random order, the aim of Super Block Race is to match the pattern with the buttons on your controller. Failing to do so results in a time penalty, giving your opponents the initiative. This is a bewildering example of how flexible *LBP2* is: a game as far from a traditional platformer as it's possible to get. Everything here requires careful tweaking, from the duration of the time penalty to how players are scored.

Making your game won't be easy, but with a broader selection of tools and more intuitive menus for using them, it's already light years ahead of things like the well-meaning Kodu. The thought of all these gears whirring in tandem is something of a brain-scrambler – and there's still more to be announced. Whether you're a player or a creator, *LBP2* is going to be an experience like no other.



Coloured strips

Among the new materials available to creators is 'hologram'. This glows with fluorescent light, and is ideal for making games with a retro flavour. It's part of one of *LBP2*'s new visual themes, Hand Made Arcade, a mix of pixel art and 8bit gaming imagery, clearly influenced by the original's user creations (sometimes it felt like every other level was an homage to games of yesteryear). One *LBP2* beta tester has even used the hologram material to make a HUD.



Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

It's the thrill of the chase and the kill for the medieval series' new multiplayer modes

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**





Rome proves to be more than a match for the multiple cities offered by the previous games. Horses can be used within its walls, which gives an indication of its vast scale

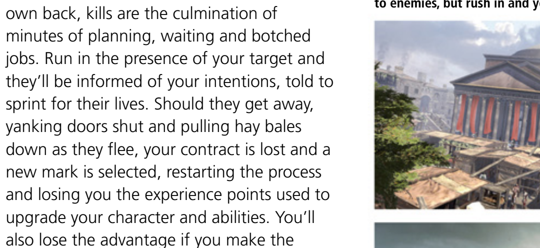
A*ssassin's Creed: Brotherhood* is not a game for the paranoid. This iteration's longest leap is the inclusion of multiplayer modes – of which only the super-tense Wanted game type has been shown.

Wandering solo around a small area of the game's gargantuan Rome, *Brotherhood*'s Wanted players are playing two games: watching for their targets, and watching their own backs. Kills travel along a chain – each player is given another human target and told to assassinate them, picking them out from a crowd using their appearance and a basic compass system.

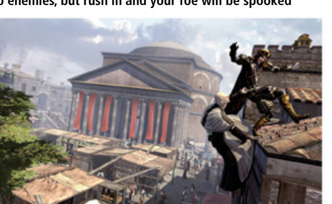
There's an array of possible skins to choose from, which sets the bedrock for a more extensive customisation system, from the last game's Ezio-alikes to masked, bird-beaked doctors. Within the city's multiplayer limits, however, these bodies are far from unique, since every civilian wandering the streets is taken from the same set. An alley filled with the same character model would look cheap to most titles, but *Brotherhood* explains it away with the series' hokey science – this online experience is a simulation, the Animus machine that so effectively brings the protagonists' memories to life also acting as a training ground for would-be assassins. In game terms, it means the act of spotting and offing your target is obfuscated: with five or six of the same person in a crowded area, trying to find the correct neck for your knife isn't easy.

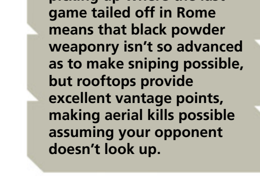
It's at this point that *Brotherhood*'s piercing sense of tension is at its most extreme. Continually balancing the need to trap and pin your target with protecting your own back, kills are the culmination of minutes of planning, waiting and botched jobs. Run in the presence of your target and they'll be informed of your intentions, told to sprint for their lives. Should they get away, yanking doors shut and pulling hay bales down as they flee, your contract is lost and a new mark is selected, restarting the process and losing you the experience points used to upgrade your character and abilities. You'll also lose the advantage if you make the wrong kill – murdering a civilian blows your cover and strips you of your current prey.

Brotherhood's neatest multiplayer trick is its attempt to make the player think like a machine to fool their temporary antagonist. Fascinating though that behaviour is, however, with its current overlay, a player's target is too easy to spot, so holding your nerve and playing dumb – bumbling into walls or biding your time sitting on a bench – is not as effective as it should be. Still, the thrill of the chase – from both angles – is very real and more palpable than in most multiplayer experiences.



Linger too long setting up a kill and you expose yourself to enemies, but rush in and your foe will be spooked

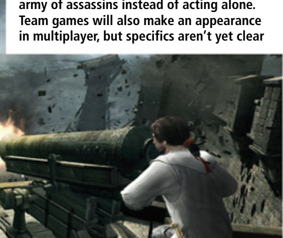




Perks of the job

Sets of perks make both sides of the coin – the chase and the flight – more manageable, with item duos activated on the fly. Simple tricks like disguises are best deployed after a short sprint, when line of sight is broken, but more complex gadgets like a gun require a lock-on and time to aim. The singleplayer picking up where the last game tailed off in Rome means that black powder weaponry isn't so advanced as to make sniping possible, but rooftops provide excellent vantage points, making aerial kills possible assuming your opponent doesn't look up.

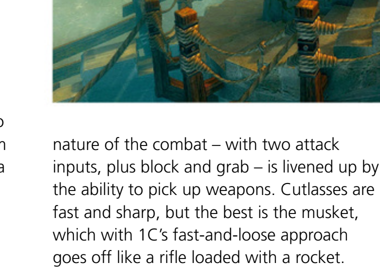
The singleplayer game sees Ezio building an army of assassins instead of acting alone. Team games will also make an appearance in multiplayer, but specifics aren't yet clear

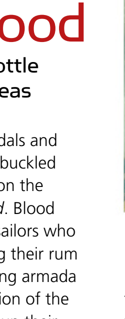


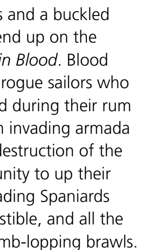
FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **1C COMPANY**
DEVELOPER: **SEAWOLF**
ORIGIN: **RUSSIA**
RELEASE: **2010**

Captain Blood

Swords, muskets and a bottle of dumb fun on the high seas







A close comparison is Nihilistic's under-appreciated 2007 thirdperson game *Conan*, with Captain Blood a similarly hulking presence and an equally overpowered brand of retro hero

If Kratos swapped his sandals and scythes for swords and a buckled swash, he might end up on the quarterdeck of 1C's *Captain Blood*. Blood and sidekick Walt are two rogue sailors who find themselves interrupted during their rum and red meat supper by an invading armada of Spaniards bent on the destruction of the British colony. The opportunity to up their cashflow and turn the invading Spaniards into cutlass kebabs is irresistible, and all the motivation 1C needs for limb-lopping brawls.

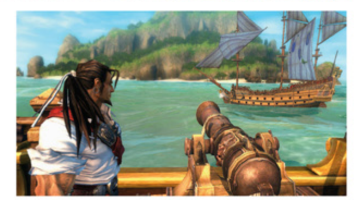
If it all seems a little like *Galleon* on steroids, that's because it is. The rinse-repeat nature of the combat – with two attack inputs, plus block and grab – is livened up by the ability to pick up weapons. Cutlasses are fast and sharp, but the best is the musket, which with 1C's fast-and-loose approach goes off like a rifle loaded with a rocket.

The Caribbean backdrops are lush and well drawn, evoking a cartoon-camp to match its eccentric, hammy script and over-the-top mincing of enemy meat. Blood himself fulfils the overly masculine archetype, having found the only supply of creatine supplements in the 17th century.

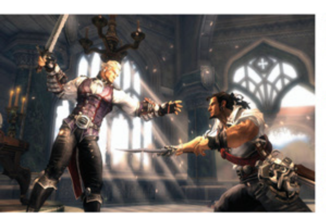
Captain Blood's biggest enemy may be the Sony San Diego inspiration. The implementation of QTEs is uninspired and does little to help the flow of the action, and the lack of a jump command means that Blood and Walt (who's playable for a short spell in our hands-on) lack the mast-swinging athleticism required to really feel like a super-powered pirate menace, grounding and ultimately restricting the action. It also means that the environments (though apparently fully modelled) are little more than backdrops to your limited range of two-hit combos and special attacks.

Captain Blood may well know where it wants to be, in other words, but it'll take a hell of a fair wind to get it anywhere near.





Turret sections are currently rough and unremarkable, and hopefully the interactive distractions in Blood's world will extend beyond crate smashing and door breaking





By sword, pistol and candlelight, Blood dishes out his gruesome and garish brand of pirate justice on whoever blocks his path to either treasure or his next meal. Sometimes one pistol isn't enough, however

Off-Road Drive

The racing genre changes down and goes back to basics

FORMAT: **PC, 360**
PUBLISHER: **1C COMPANY**
DEVELOPER: **1C: AVALON**
ORIGIN: **RUSSIA**
RELEASE: **Q4 2010**

Aggression is the buzzword for today's turbo-charged racers. From the car-crushing power-ups of *Blur* to the action-movie pursuits of *Split Second*, even Codemasters' *Dirt* took a more sensationalist tack with its hulking stages and shimmering paintjobs. In this context, *Off-Road Drive* is a shock to the system. Epic's Unreal Engine 3 is known more for its gloss than grit, but 1C: Avalon is harnessing the technology to render the world of off-road navigation as faithfully as possible. It means an experience that counters everything you've been taught recently by the genre. That measly rock formation? You'd better set up a winch. An uphill incline? Time to shift down and monitor the gradient meter.

The weight of each vehicle determines the rate of your progress, with adjustable tyre pressures key to your traversal of the varied conditions. The rugged sand trail we previewed reduced an off-road truck to scrap in moments, teaching harsh lessons in patience and forcing a more cautious approach to momentum and velocity. Particles, water and damage are all rendered crisply and transform the experience from a simulation into a tourist trip, spanning world-famous locales and track layouts.

Events are divided between mud bogging and generic races, though even the races are given a realist spin by the fragility of your vehicle and the harsh geography. Wheel-spinning a cluster of rocks into the bonnet of a rival can bend steering wheels out of shape and change the look of the leaderboard.

It's encouraging to see a commitment to realism in a genre that's recently become a playground for excess, showing that sometimes, when all around you are offering style and explosions, it's good to remember the basics.

Taking in the scenery is a deadly distraction when you should be inching your way out of the leaderboard gutter







Flooring it isn't an option if you want to maintain your tyre treads and your dignity. It's all a far cry from the smash and trash antics of a *MotorStorm* session



Shogun 2: Total War

The Creative Assembly ditches gunpowder for cold steel, and returns to Japan

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2011**

Following up *Empire: Total War* presented The Creative Assembly with a dilemma. Where to go once you've taken over the world? One possible answer, in the form of *Napoleon: Total War*, was the direction of a more heavily structured, narrative experience within the epic scope of *Empire*. *Shogun 2*, however, sees The Creative Assembly returning to the Japanese feudal fiefdoms from which the *Total War* machine emerged, and swapping the struggle for world domination for a fierce battle for control over the country.

Shifting from the multinational milieu of 18th and 19th century Europe to the culture of 16th century Japan makes *Shogun 2* one of the more stylistically distinct entries in the *Total War* series. Indeed, CA is keen to stress that its latest entry in the series is "art led", showing us concepts based on Japanese woodblock paintings before leading in to our demonstration. According to **Kevin McDowell**, the lead artist on the series: "The style and the simplicity of the period segues into thinking about the design."

Creative director **Mike Simpson** elaborates: "If you look at [armour] on the units, it affects the way you expect to see them move. A Japanese guy walks differently to the way a European walks, partially due to the equipment they were wearing." A more substantial aesthetic influence on the game's design will be felt in the cases of the era's architecture and engineering. "If you look at the way their ships were designed, and the way the castles were built," Simpson says, "there's a different aesthetic which results in very different gameplay."

Castle sieges have been redesigned to take the form of multi-stage battles, with defenders able to lure attackers into ambushes through the staggered layers of their defences. "Siege weapons don't really work the way they would on a medieval battlefield," Simpson explains. "You can't just hammer down the walls of a Japanese castle." Instead, players can use infantry to scale the sloping walls of the fortresses (often built into mountainsides) and storm the structure from multiple points in the hope of stretching the defending forces too thinly.







In previous *Total War* games, armour was a flat texture applied to the character models. *Shogun 2*'s soldiers, however, will be heading off to war under the weight of fully 3D gear

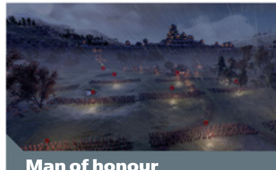
The studio promises that the combinations of castle layout and terrain styles will result in 15 variations of siege scenario.

One new terrain type is the coastal region which, in tandem with *Shogun 2*'s warship design (rather than *Empire* and *Napoleon*'s sail-powered fleets, *Shogun 2*'s boats will be rowed into battle), promises a massively overhauled style of naval warfare. Put simply, this new level of manoeuvrability means navies will be able to use terrain features such as shallow water, reefs, inlets and rivers to tactical advantage – boats packed with archers can be tucked away and defended with barges of infantry troops, and opposing fleets can even be dashed against rocks. The oar-powered ships, free from the whims of the wind, will control more like land-based units, and battles will be won by the infantry crewing each vessel rather than which has the largest guns.

The Creative Assembly may be scaling back on *Empire*'s scope, but refuses to do the same for the series' ambitions. *Shogun 2* looks to further refine the *Total War* formula while soaking up the details of a setting more distinct and characterful than *Empire*'s, and suggests that, once you've taken over the world, the only option left is a proud return to the homeland.



While the presence of infantry on the beaches is intriguing, CA is unsure if simultaneous land and sea battles will be in the finished game. They are, however, a long-term ambition for the franchise



Man of honour

Shogun 2 **sees players take on the role of a feudal leader in a divided, warring Japan. Players will be more closely identified with their faction leader than in previous** ***Total War*** **games, and will even, through decisions they make, influence the traits and skills of the character. How** ***Shogun 2*** **will handle less martial aspects of feudal Japan is unclear. The Creative Assembly states that the ritual suicide seppuku, performed by dishonoured warriors, will appear in some form, and that the traditional feudal Japanese concern with honour will also be a feature. It does stress, though, that you can't have honourable actions without a few dishonourable ones.**

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT PARIS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier

Invisibility cloaks might enrage traditionalists, but could infiltration make the lull more thrilling than the storm?



The *Ghost Recon* series has long since fallen victim to gung-ho bombast. Gone is the unrelenting tension of crawling through the undergrowth, knowing that a single bullet could crack your skull open at any second.

Instead, recent instalments have given us enhanced-reality HUDs, aerial drones, and plots pumped full of gun-toting, chest-bumping nonsense. But while the series' latter-day trigger-happy action seems here to stay with *Future Soldier*, Ubisoft Paris' latest effort has seen fit to reinsert a little of the subtlety lost in the two *Advanced Warfighter* games.

While military purists may baulk at the inclusion of thermoptic camouflage, it's actually something of a coup, recapturing the sense that you are on a covert mission behind enemy lines rather than partaking in a high-explosive military bum rush. Missions see you and your squad infiltrate enemy positions, launching coordinated assaults to simultaneously execute the unwitting goons who are supposedly on guard, leaving the prime target exposed and undefended.

The ability to creep among enemy patrols unnoticed allows for close combat previously unknown to the series. It's an activity presented with appropriate suspense, yet staged with such dramatic precision that we suspect the use of stealth may be rather prescriptive. The open environments would seem to suggest otherwise – the dry harbour mouth of a coastal Eastern Bloc township implies multiple approaches, but it's hard to believe that the cinematic inflection given to the approach chosen during our demo is something that arises dynamically.

Perhaps a little more obviously freeform are the firefights, which return to the series' well-worn cover mechanics, while exploiting a greater awareness of height and vantage over the open arenas. But the enemy is no pushover, quickly rallying its forces, and bringing reinforcements in the form of helicopters and Remote Mobile Weapon Platforms – military robots which bridge the gap between the RC car and the Terminator.

As the bullets chew through the judiciously spaced crates that you cower behind, it's clear that Ubisoft will deliver frenetic carnage rendered with the cold hi-fidelity that has typified the series. But for all the rattling Gatling guns and scripted helicopter crashes, we can't help but think that *Future Soldier* is made a more interesting proposition by its sneaky avoidance of battle.



Enemies often come at you from all sides. To help counter this, *Future Soldier* introduces Link-Up, a squad-based variation of *Army Of Two*'s back-to-back slow-motion shootouts – but now toggled at will

Men Of War: Vietnam

The Men Of War series heads east to tackle some of history's darkest days

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **1C COMPANY**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **RUSSIA**
RELEASE: **2010**

There have been attempts to play around in the Vietnam conflict – most notably in the 'war boom' of the last generation with titles like *Shellshock: Nam '67* and *Conflict Vietnam*. The problem is that, unlike the real conflict, they're very one-sided. 1C is attempting to redress the balance with *Men Of War: Vietnam*.

A hybrid of RTS and the more intimate tactical action familiar to veterans of the *Commandos* series (or even *Cannon Fodder*), *MOW: Vietnam* is a thoroughly researched attempt to realise the two sides of the war across two separate campaigns. The US portion sees you take charge of five soldiers sent into the thick of it to uncover and disable Viet Cong forces, while the other half of the campaign is devoted to a hybrid group of Soviets and Viet Cong.

It's the detail that strikes first. The environments are lush battlefields, defiled by the chaos of your tug-of-war exchanges with the opposing force. Layered with vegetation, they play a key role in your survival by providing cover and flanking opportunities for your units. Managing the geography of the Vietnamese undergrowth is a priority, but so too is your inventory. Fleecing corpses for vital resources is imperative to survival and the vulnerability of your squad (think *Full Spectrum Warrior*) is a constant concern.





Direct Control mode returns, enabling pinpoint targeting and specific commands. Providing sniper cover manually can be the difference between success and failure

The narrative of the original *Men Of War*, released in 2009, was bolted on, not integral to the experience, and here there's an opportunity for the team to go deeper into both setting and politics as it doles out its tactical thrills. If 1C can bring a similar pace and balance to the game's narrative as its battlefield, it may be a war worth signing up for.



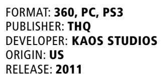
Animations are the only obvious weak link, but there's plenty of time to iron out the kinks in an excursion to a setting that's often fallen below expectations



Homefront

It's invasion USA in THQ's survival story





FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **KAOS STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2011**

The broken nation of *Homefront* is brought to life by a heavily modified Unreal Engine 3. The assault on the warehouse is hectic and harrowing as you dodge flaming soldiers



The narrative is drip-fed through pieces of the gameworld, with the hint of an irradiated Mississippi river suggesting a country divided. Whether we'll be donning *Metro 2033*'s protective headgear to make a crossing remains to be seen

A montage of newsfeeds opens the *Homefront* presentation. A thumping drum beat punctuates a mix of archive footage and dystopian legends with a clear message: Korea is coming. America is falling at the hands of an invading group of countries under the banner of North Korea, a political hot potato if ever there was one, and so for once the Yanks are on the back foot. It's a trajectory for a war that has been 'researched' and 'considered', assures the team, beginning with a unification of Korea in 2015, a Japanese alliance in 2018 and an invasion of America in 2025. Oh, and a flu strain that wipes out enough of the US population to make it an even playing field.

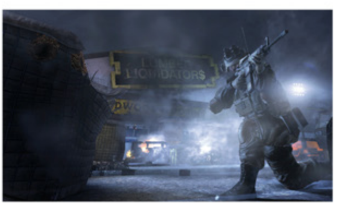
So *Homefront* could quite easily be harnessed as a piece of homeland security propaganda, or hijacked as a promotional tool for gun ownership, but underneath any thematic grey areas it looks like there's a competent shooter.

Our hands-off presentation covers two chapters with distinct settings and separate tones and demands. The first is an induction into the makeshift community of the newly under-siege America. Set in a formerly suburban neighbourhood, gardens have been turned into a hybrid of barracks and recreational areas. There's an atmosphere of impending threat, thanks to the armed sentries, and of fragile humanity – children playing on swings, unaware of the potential disaster that's awaiting them, provide background noise that's hauntingly dissonant. There's a sophistication in the costume and art design that manages to evoke both a traditional sense of rebellion (bandanas all round) and patriotism (who could possibly resist an American eagle belt buckle in the midst of a national crisis?). Its closest relative – and THQ stablemate – is *Metro 2033*, which at its best reached atmospheric heights with a similar contrast between despair and the tenacity of the human spirit.

Weapons are based on modern military designs and evolved according to the modifications that soldiers have provided through field experience (rifle scopes are reinforced to avoid coming loose on impact, for example). The second section we're shown puts those weapons to good use. Set in the parking lot of a warehouse district, there's again a feeling of a society stripped and ravaged by war.

There are concessions made to drama during these set-pieces that usher in the filmic tropes of big bangs and slow motion, mustering up macho might to overemphasise the danger and betray the realist tone. Compared to the previous chapter's quiet-time whispers of character, this is the war cry. The scene begins with a diversion and assault on the patrolling Korean forces – masked stormtroopers who are armed to the teeth. The assault on the base involves an incendiary phosphorous bombing that sets soldiers on fire and leads to an awful lot of screaming. It's a hard scene to stomach, and one that expresses the horror of war like few we've seen in years of FPS carnage. It's brought home further as your vantage point literally collapses and you're plunged face first into the fray.

While mostly stirring, there's a convenience to some of the scripted scenes that errs on the side of comic-book silliness as the main characters survive wave after wave of detonations and bullet-hell. But with plenty of time until release, Kaos is clearly showing only a few of its cards. The studio has had a rapid rise from its origin with *Battlefield 1942* mod Desert Combat (based on the Gulf War) to *Frontlines: Fuel Of War* and now the console-only *Homefront*. It's a journey that's seen the New York-based team grow from strength to strength, increasing both its ambitions and team size. Ambition is something Kaos will doubtlessly need, but so too is bravado, as it enters the fierce competition of the military FPS genre next year.



American characters have a more earthy look than their armed and dangerous enemies from the east, and there's a hint of the confederacy to some of the US outfits. Multiplayer has been announced but not yet revealed





Organic audio

Each of the standout moments of our demo are heightened by the audio design work, and director of audio Matt Harwood is keen to emphasise the research and improvisation of his efforts. Testing and recording real weapons was a cornerstone of the aural exploration, from machine-guns to rifles, and it has paid dividends to the weapon feedback. One of our favourite anecdotes concerns the ferocious Goliath tank. That sound of the metal monster crashing into the scene at the climax of the warehouse assault? That'd be Harwood's dog chewing on ice cubes.

FORMAT: **360, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (BEENOX STUDIOS)**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions

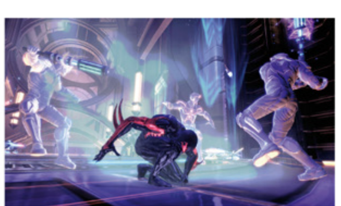
Does whatever four distinct spiders with their own individual levels and powers can

If there's any single element of comic-book superheroes that videogames have failed to realise, it's their ever-changing nature, with studios rarely straying far beyond bringing the most in-vogue version of their licensed hero to the screen. In contrast, *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions* may lure players in with a familiar version of the mainstream Amazing Spider-Man, but it invites them to explore rather more obscure incarnations too.

A story involving the broken pieces of a magical amulet explains players taking on the role of four Spider-Men across four equally distinct worlds. The Amazing Spider-Man and his bright, colourful world is familiar, but the two other universes shown so far may not be. Spider-Man Noir is a depression-era Spidey, clad in a trenchcoat and WWI-vintage aviation helmet. His gameplay sections are more stealth-based, and a section we've seen – taking place in a Coney Island-style amusement park – involves using the cover of darkness to incapacitate crime lord Norman Osborne's thugs with web-slinging takedown manoeuvres. Occasional fireworks light up the night sky, revealing Spidey's position to his foes.

The last dimension shown is based on the Marvel 2099 imprint, with a futuristic Spider-Man freefalling through a hi-tech cityscape in pursuit of Hobgoblin. The ensuing battle showcases a faster, more feral combat style than his two alter-egos, making savage use of the spikes protruding from his arms. How well the overall game segues between these playstyles remains to be seen, but with one last continuity still to be revealed, *Shattered Dimensions* is in no danger of lacking variety.


The Amazing Spider-Man levels have wisely taken Spidey out of New York, tasking players with tracking down villain Kraven the Hunter on his jungle home turf





True Crime

Activision's open-world franchise downs a shot of Tequila

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **UNITED FRONT GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q4 2010**

Back in 2005, *True Crime: New York City* appeared to have permanently relegated Activision's open-world undercover cop franchise to desk duties. Five years on and *True Crime* is back on the beat, patrolling the mean streets of Hong Kong and sporting the ubiquitous stamp of a franchise relaunch: no subtitle.

Taking the role of Triad infiltrator Detective Wei Shen, players are tasked with balancing the conflicting demands of their crime lord and police bosses across missions which utilise a familiar mix of driving and thirdperson action. In the mission we're shown, Shen is sent to attack a waterfront warehouse operated by rival Triads. Taking its cues from Hong Kong action flicks, *True Crime* features a significant amount of hand-to-hand combat. We watch as Shen, running low on ammo, vaults over a worktop then disarms and breaks the arm of one gang member before slamming another into a fusebox on the wall.

As the criminal he's been sent to take down flees the building by car, Shen follows on motorbike with the police not far behind. The chase culminates in Shen leaping from bike to car in a move more *Just Cause* than *GTA*, activated through a single button tap as the vehicles draw close together.

Whereas previous *True Crime* games boasted of their accurate city recreations, the new title won't be featuring quite such a literal interpretation of Hong Kong, United Front Games' reasoning being that a dogged recreation simply isn't as fun as a tailored environment. The blur of fog and neon certainly looks the part, and a contemporary open-world environment that isn't another take on NYC is a fine proposition.

Previous *True Crime* titles failed to make a successful bid for what was *GTA*'s undisputed open-world crown, but it's a more diverse genre nowadays, and one in which United Front's stylish take on the franchise could find a place.


True Crime's action sequences tend toward excess rather than gritty realism. When he's not leaping from vehicles, Shen can often be found using other cars as bike ramps



At various points, players will have to make decisions that will endear them to either their Triad bosses or their police department colleagues

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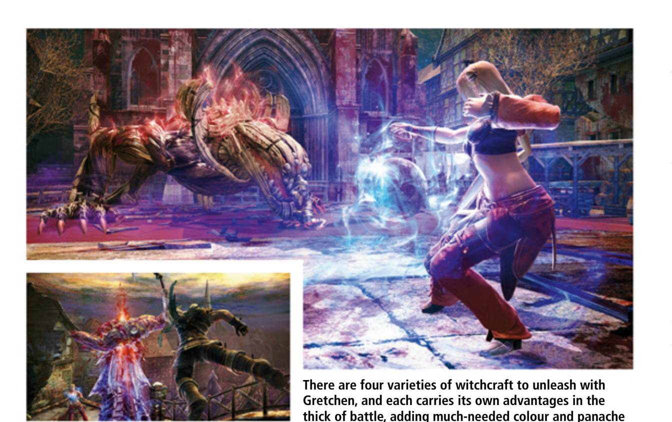
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2011**

Knights Contract

Another day, another XY team-up of co-operative proportions

Bayonetta's global success clearly hasn't gone unnoticed in *Knights Contract*'s design meetings. A fantasy setting, a witch gone rogue and a penchant for spell-casting are all to be found in *Contract*'s sketchbook of influences. Factor in hack/slash mechanics and a combo system and your game's already in the charts, surely?

To its credit, Namco is adjusting the formula with a two-character set of protagonists headed up by brutal beefcake (and former witch executioner) Heindrich. It's this medieval muscle mass that you take control of, resorting to his partner Gretchen only to cast spells and perform special attacks on command. Gretchen is more a weapon than a partner, then, and one that brings some welcome dazzle to the otherwise muted scenarios of our preview. Heindrich's invincibility is countered by the fact that Gretchen is mortal, which gives *Contract* a flavour of Ocean's 1993 Comic Relief game *Sleepwalker* as you protect your partner. As if the gender roles weren't defined enough, one section has Heindrich cradling Gretchen as the scenery is munched up by a screen-filling baddie. It's a set-piece that indicates a linear structure but also a functional and unobtrusive approach to directed action, and it certainly looks the part as Heindrich races towards the screen in Raiders Of The Lost Ark framing.



There are four varieties of witchcraft to unleash with Gretchen, and each carries its own advantages in the thick of battle, adding much-needed colour and panache





There's a suitable heft to Heinrich's animations as he ploughs through the beasts pillaging the medieval-style towns, something that's countered by the delicate acrobatics of Gretchen, his 'resurrected witch' other half

There is talk of higher fantasy during our demo, but it's the combat that will count. With *Bayonetta*'s bullet heels taking the genre to climax so recently, however, titles like *Knights Contract* have a high bar to aim for. With a release date some way off, and many of the pieces already set firmly on the board, it clearly has every intention of making a serious move.

Splatterhouse

Blood is good in Namco Bandai's salute to the past

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**



Blood-red dungeons and catacombs filled with evil provide the backdrop to your journey through hell. A post-apocalyptic setting was mentioned, but not shown

"More blood is more power" is the mantra of Namco's US *Splatterhouse* team. Dr West is up to his satanic tricks again in this revamp of the 1988 arcade original, plunging 'everyman' Rick into the steroidal Terror Mask that gives him the brainless bloodlust he needs to dish out a beating. Brainless is the word: *Splatterhouse* is unashamedly silly, reducing enemies to skeletal remains and removing any – and every – conceivable limb in the process. Offing the 'Corrupted' who have made their way from hell into West's basement is your only concern, though platforming sections rear their uninspired heads throughout our hands-off demonstration.

A thirdperson beat 'em up to file alongside *Hunter: The Reckoning* rather than *God Of War*, the action is currently stuttering, a victim of some serious collision issues (hopefully nothing which can't be ironed out before release) and so drenched in its bloodlust that it can be a chore to watch, let alone enjoy.

The design team has clearly channelled its resources into anatomical dismemberment: Rick's skin and bone regenerate after combat and the methods of turning the shuffling dead into fist fodder (in order to open doors and progress) are as excessive as they are sadistic. The original *Splatterhouse* may have been Japanese-made, but it took its inspiration from '80s American slasher flicks; the new developers are keen to pick up the horror thread and unravel it into the more recent subgenre of gore-porn.

If that doesn't quench your thirst for blood, the promise of all three original *Splatterhouse* games – including the full Japanese original that failed to make it past western censorship first time out – should provide further encouragement. In line with its inspiration, and certainly living up to its developer's aspirations, *Splatterhouse* looks like a true videogame nasty.



In a nod to its roots, side-scrolling sections have been included. With decidedly old-school fixed routes for enemies and gauntlets, however, they sit awkwardly in a game that should really be aiming for fluidity









Amnesia: The Dark Descent

Frictional Games bursts screaming from a cupboard to deliver another shock of indie horror



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **FRICTIONAL GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**



Brennenburg is being overtaken by a fleshy growth – but either due to lacklustre realisation or the fact that meat isn't all that scary, it failed to quicken our pulse

Horror dictum states that it's not what you see that scares you, but what you don't see – and that's true of Frictional Games' latest survival horror endeavour for both good and bad reasons. Ditching the current-day creepiness of the *Penumbra* series, *Amnesia* slings the player back to the mid-1800s and a castle in the Prussian hinterland. As Daniel, an English gent with archaeological aspirations, you awake with no memory of how you came to be here – but actually your surroundings are all too familiar, with the unglamorous engine pumping out glum, blocky medievalism akin to yesteryear's horror gaming fare.

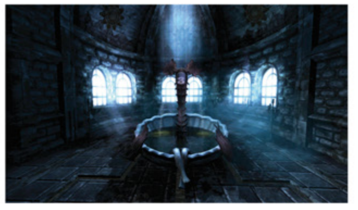
That *Amnesia* manages to overcome its visual limitations is testament to Frictional Games' ability to maintain an atmosphere of unrelenting dread and then slap you sharply with total panic at exactly the right moment. Left with a cryptic message from yourself and the occasional fuzzy recollection played out in voiceover, you stumble through the corridors of Brennenburg castle, uncovering the sinister machinations of its resident aristocrat and suffering jarring hallucinations. As in *Call Of Cthulhu: Dark Corners Of The Earth*, the player's sanity is measured like health and is periodically sapped, both by unsettling scripted events and by spending too long in the dark. Luckily, Daniel is able to make it through the shadowy halls by lighting candles, quaffing sanity potions and ensuring his lantern is topped up with fuel.



Amnesia makes sure that your supply of tinder, oil and potion is constrained enough to maintain a constant level of caution without making progress impossible. It also complicates things in a rather elegant way: darkness may induce madness but you may well find yourself with reason to hide in it. Brennenburg's halls are haunted by more than just whispers. Nasty shambling things, deadly poltergeists and worse lurk here. Their appearances are rare, but suitably unnerving, and with no means of fighting them the only option is to run or dive into shadow. Looking at the creatures is likely to send you insane, too – which is something of a shame, since it would offer welcome visual variety from the stone walls and floors. Nonetheless, our most terrifying encounter has been with an invisible thing which splashes after you through the flooded castle vaults – enraged every time you set foot in the water.

Elsewhere, the game proves a little less effective at inducing tension. Though the ability to move and manipulate objects offers occasionally neat puzzling, some of the physics interactions are a little fussy and awkward – there's nothing quite like the frustration of opening a door into your own face when you're trying to escape from a demonic spirit. It also, perhaps, takes a little too long to ratchet up the shocks, confining the player's first hour or more of experience to purely hallucinatory horrors. Nonetheless, when it works, it works to great effect. Here's hoping that what awaits us in the full version of *Amnesia* creates keyboard hammering, mouse-flailing terror of the kind we're unlikely to forget.





Losing your sanity causes the perspective to distort, your heart to pound and rats to scuttle everywhere. It acts as a tiered health system: you recharge by standing in the light but only to the next tier. To get back to normality you'll need a potion



Voices in your head

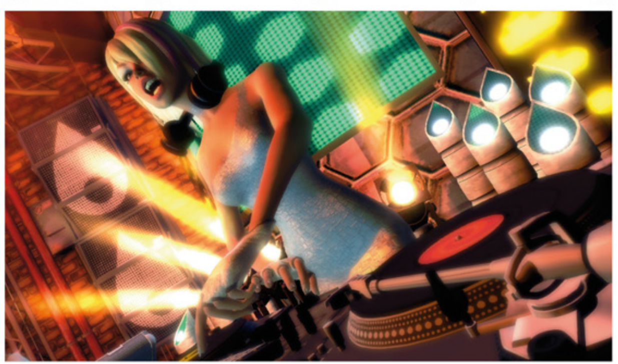
Using unusually competent voice acting for an indie production, *Amnesia* reveals its backstory through ghostly echoes of events, recollections and diary notes found around the environment. It builds a picture of some literate intentions – eerie events paying homage to Cthulhu, Dracula and Frankenstein, as Brennenburg castle becomes the site of ghastly experiments. But just what was your role in it all? Why did your past self elect to wipe his own memory? We suspect Daniel might not be as innocent as his plummy golly-goshing would at first suggest.

FORMAT: **360, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **FREESTYLE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

DJ Hero 2

No need for new plastic – just a desire to mix things up a bit





DJ Hero 2's track listing will be slightly more populist, with mixes of Lady Gaga and the Pussycat Dolls appearing in our demonstration, and Nelly, the Chemical Brothers, Warren G and Rihanna promised too

The first *DJ Hero* managed to condense the DJ experience into a package that made for a complex, multitasking game, and was accessible without being oversimplified. In fact, it was rather tricky, asking players to dedicate one hand to left-right motions while using the other to scratch forwards and backwards while hitting constantly flowing notes. The challenge facing *DJ Hero 2* is to build on its predecessor's success without compromising the balance the first title achieved.

"We're not trying to reinvent the wheel," says **Jamie Jackson**, *DJ Hero 2*'s creative director. "We're not saying, 'Hey, here's some new plastic you have to buy!' We've focused on good gameplay innovations… we've listened to the audience we have and why they enjoyed [*DJ Hero*]." A central addition is freestyle gameplay. Sections of the music track contain highlighted strips enabling players to experiment with the scratch and crossfader; glowing lines within those bars suggest possible freestyle routes, but players are able mix the track how they see fit. They'll be mixing in specially designed





While they never became a primary form of competitive play in *Guitar Hero*, Jackson believes call-and-response battles are a perfect fit for the culture *DJ Hero* reflects

freestyle elements crafted specifically for each track, and Jackson is proud of the result. "It's hard for me to make it sound bad," he says. "It's easy to listen to a track, cut it with a vocal from another track, and then manipulate it to say something new."

Other additions include mic support and drafting in the drop-in, drop-out Party Play mode that debuted in *Guitar Hero 5*. Players of a less social, more competitive bent can indulge in call-and-response DJ battles, while the singleplayer experience has been overhauled to chronicle the journey of a DJ in the newly branded Empire mode.

The quality of the first *DJ Hero* was partly the result of FreeStyle Games' ambition not surpassing its reach. With the first game's foundations now firmly in place, we're looking forward to the remix.

WINtA

Parappa The Rapper creator joins with OneBigGame for charity title

FORMAT: **IPHONE**
PUBLISHER: **ONEBIGGAME**
DEVELOPER: **NANAON-SHA, TRIANGLE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN, NETHERLANDS**
RELEASE: **TBC**

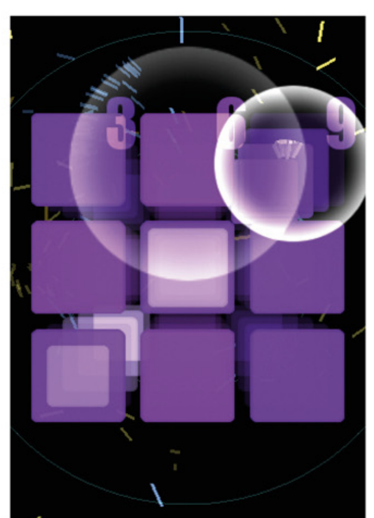


Difficulty is still being tweaked, which, considering our miserable score of 41 per cent, is no bad thing. OneBigGame founder Martin De Ronde was on hand to demonstrate how it should be done, earning himself a 96 per cent score

A rhythm-action game resulting from a collaboration between *Parappa The Rapper* creator **Masaya Matsuura** and Dutch independent developer Triangle Studios, *WINtA* is the second title to be released by not-for-profit publisher OneBigGame, and the first game resulting from the initiative's aim to put veteran designers in touch with startup studios.

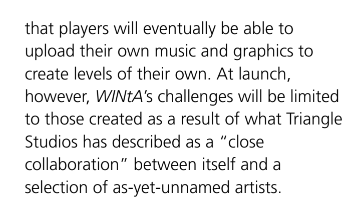
WINtA refers to a lyric from a Marvin Gaye song, War Is Not The Answer, and the single track available in our demo is a funky Matsuura creation with the same name. Bright patterns of blocks appear and arrange themselves in time with the music, while individual squares in these patterns fill with light – tapping them the moment they're completely filled gains maximum points, but mess up the timing and the song slows and distorts. More complex parts need multiple squares to be pressed simultaneously, requiring fingers to twist over the screen. When played on an iPad display, it feels like a dance mat for the hands.

"We see *WINtA* as an open platform for artists," Matsuura explains, promising





Though an iPhone release, ***WINtA*** feels comfortable, and perhaps even more at home, on an iPad's larger screen



that players will eventually be able to upload their own music and graphics to create levels of their own. At launch, however, *WINtA*'s challenges will be limited to those created as a result of what Triangle Studios has described as a "close collaboration" between itself and a selection of as-yet-unnamed artists.

While Matsuura hopes that *WINtA* will eventually open up the rhythm-action genre, at launch the game will be a more choreographed affair. But if Triangle, NanaOn-Sha and their collaborators can provide a selection of levels that showcase the creative potential of the title, it could make for an effective foundation.



TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

CAN AN INDIE ECO-SIM CHANGE THE CLIMATE OF GAME DEVELOPMENT?

We've been derailed on to the topic of methane clathrate. This unstable form of fossil fuel, most recently responsible for causing the explosion at the Deepwater Horizon rig, is being touted by energy companies as a successor to oil. The way indie developer **Gobion Rowlands** tells it, methane clathrate is seriously bad news. The theory goes that, when released, crystals of methane and ice buried in the ocean deep and Arctic permafrost could cause a greenhouse feedback loop capable of raising the Earth's temperature tens of degrees, according to some estimates. Oceans would rise, deserts would spread and mankind would be faced with extinction.

Such apocalyptic eventualities are a dime a dozen in videogames, but their *causes* are *Fate Of The World*'s bread and butter. The player toys with a complex ecological simulation of the Earth over the better part of two centuries – and, depending on their chosen objectives, can decide to rescue it from the brink of destruction or ensure that humanity's annihilation is absolute. It's a game from Red Redemption, the studio of which Rowlands is founder and CIO, and it has no small ambitions, hoping to establish a new market of socially conscious gamers through unusual partners such as Oxfam.

"We only make games which have social impact," says Rowlands. "They've got to be fun games first of all, but they also have to deal with some kind of real-world issue. And part of that is, if people buy it through Oxfam, then Oxfam will take their distributors' cut – so it's fund-raising for them, while we get to survive and progress as an indie. And our game was a really good fit for them because it deals with so many of the same issues they encounter."

But *Fate* isn't a po-faced diatribe against humanity's many and evident ecological failings. It immediately encourages that inclination towards anarchy that all good sandboxes tempt.

"We have a dynamically modelled Earth based on NASA data," says Rowlands. "We have a peer-reviewed gas-climate model for carbon concentrations and warming. Our model tracks population, sea level, forestry cover, ice caps and changing landscapes. But as much as we want people to understand what's going on here, it's a game and you have to have fun. There's real data here, but it's real data in the same way that you have in a Formula One game – when you go round a corner you want it to react like an F1 car, and when we model the world, it needs to feel reactive and dynamic like the real world. But it's not the thing that drives the game – that's the narrative the players get through the cards."

"IT'S REAL DATA IN THE SAME WAY THAT YOU HAVE IN A FORMULA ONE GAME – WHEN YOU GO ROUND A CORNER YOU WANT IT TO REACT LIKE AN F1 CAR"

Cards are the policies you can enact, and they are dealt to you from a number of decks covering the full spectrum of sanity. At one end you have the opportunity to improve your rail infrastructure, and at the other you might decide to kill everyone over the age of 30, à la Logan's Run. It's a structure inherited from *Climate Challenge*, a free Flash game Red Redemption made for the BBC in 2006. Back then, the BBC wasn't quite ready to embrace the more colourful projections for humanity's future which Red Redemption is keen to include in *Fate*.

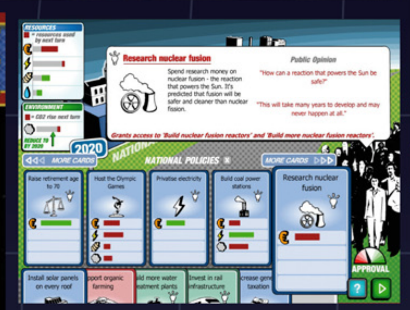
TITLE: **FATE OF THE WORLD**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **RED REDEMPTION**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**







The regions in which you operate vary in size: North America is taken as a whole and the UK and Europe also operate in concert, while China and Japan are powers unto themselves



There will be a methane clathrate exploitation chain of cards in *Fate Of The World* – so you may consider (as real-world energy companies are right now) whether or not the increased fuel resources they represent are worth the risks of tapping them

"We had a million people play *Climate Challenge* within seven weeks," says Rowlands. "It's still one of the top games on the BBC's science and nature website. But nine out of ten players just caused as much havoc as possible. And we thought, well, of course you would. It's important for people to be able to ask, 'How bad can it get?' or, 'What kind of mess can I make?' Dealing with climate change is interesting, but of itself, where does it get you? If you say, 'I want a colony on Mars', but your landing pads are flooded, you haven't got enough fuel, there are people rioting and you need to get evacuation ships off the world, that becomes much more fun. It's all about building that narrative."

Thus, the game begins with the player selecting an end goal, the masterplan. There's The Apocalypse, The Lifeboat and The Soylent Green Future, among a number of others. Rowlands intriguingly suggests that, later, Red Redemption hopes to release a Robot Future.









Payback

"If we make enough of a success out of this game, what I'd love to do is to put money towards other indie developers," says Rowlands (above). "There's so much talent out there – a lot of it might fail because it's experimental, but from that you get real gems. Already, in trying to pass something back, I've been able to tell other developers about potential investment networks they could look into; how to do a pitch; how to talk to investors; what you should be expecting."

"There's a one human policy and that one human is you," he says. "Picking something like The Apocalypse scenario sounds easy, but it's actually not – if you kill too many too fast, they don't produce enough emissions and cause enough problems. So there's some strategy to it."

People are reluctant enough to recycle milk cartons, let alone embark on a policy of mass murder to safeguard resources, says Rowlands. And though you play as the head of the hurriedly established World Environment Organisation, you aren't in possession of unilateral power. Your policies are enacted by WEO agents, who you can send in to up to 12 global regions, each of which has its own problems and may well decide to reject your policies – or worse.

"If you go to the US and the first thing you do is to implement a one-child policy and try banning meat, then they might just tell you to get out," says Rowlands. "Your agents can get killed, lost, blackmailed and kidnapped – so your agency gets taken away." Rowlands taps his laptop screen. "I've just tried to ban meat here and the carnivores have rebelled. My legislation has completely failed. They're not happy."

Under what circumstances, we wonder, would the US populace agree to processing dead people into ration wafers? Policy acceptance, Rowlands says, is a delicate balance which takes into account all manner of variables. "A lot of it is to do with public opinion," he explains. "All the policies have a range of popularity from love to hate. But behind the game we have lots of different





Each card lasts a certain number of turns. Some things are linear: build train tracks, you get train tracks. Others are more variable: if you research fusion, you may or may not get fusion







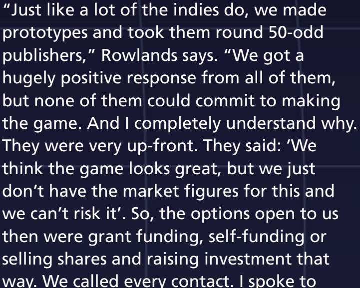


levers that players can mess with: we're tracking emissions, population, GDP, energy demands, the human development index. And then we're also tracking stresses within the countries – what are they're interested in. You can end up with nuclear war situations in certain places, but *Fate* isn't focused on that. The *Civilization* games, for comparison, are about land usage and nations and cities and wars. And, well, whatever you think about it, in a hundred years' time, New York is still going to be there. It may be a flooded New York but there's still going to be people there. Countries may have changed slightly and amalgamated, but what happens to the world as a whole will really be more about temperature and energy. The future of humanity revolves around energy – where we get it from and what we do with it.

"Games can be much broader. Everyone's aware of games now, but they're not necessarily interested in them – so you have to find the games for them. I think that's what's so interesting about the indie game space: you can reach niches that otherwise won't get reached. We're making a game that deals with climate change issues – that is niche in terms of the current videogame market – but only because it hasn't been explored."

EVERYONE SHOULD BE INTERESTED, GIVEN THAT THE GAME BREAKS DOWN THE NUMBER ONE THREAT TO HUMAN EXISTENCE ON THE PLANET

With the kind of numbers that *Climate Challenge* attracted, and the increased prominence of gaming in general, not least from initiatives with an interest in social change, Rowlands is confident there's a market for *Fate*. Potential publishers, however, weren't willing to take that risk.



"Just like a lot of the indies do, we made prototypes and took them round 50-odd publishers," Rowlands says. "We got a hugely positive response from all of them, but none of them could commit to making the game. And I completely understand why. They were very up-front. They said: 'We think the game looks great, but we just don't have the market figures for this and we can't risk it'. So, the options open to us then were grant funding, self-funding or selling shares and raising investment that way. We called every contact. I spoke to Mark Morris [of Introversion] and Cliff Harris [of Positech] and talked to them. And I have to say, there are no more helpful people out there than those in the indie community. Through them we found investors who were willing to take that risk, who really liked what we were trying to achieve. Our biggest investor is the managing director of Deutsche Bank's asset management arm – he's in charge of all their clean tech and renewable investments globally."

It's fitting that the game should attract investors with similar green preoccupations – and Rowlands suggests its backers have been extremely financially supportive indeed. But to be a success, Red Redemption will have to hope that *Fate*'s environmental angle widens its appeal to both gamers and those with ecological interests, rather than restricting its market to the intersection of those two demographics. There's no doubt everyone *should* be interested, given that the game breaks down the number one threat to human existence on the planet and shows just how delicately the many factors that affect it are poised. Shake up *Fate*'s climate model, and just a four-degree increase in global temperature is all it takes to cause widespread desertification, the extinction of one in ten animal species and stagnation of the oceans – and that's before you play the methane clathrate card. BP's CEO Tony Hayward is said to have a plaque on his desk which reads: 'If you knew you could not fail, what would you try?' Perhaps, if he plays *Fate*, he'll decide he's better off not finding out.



"Red Redemption is named after a cult in a comic book by Philippe Druillet," says Rowlands. It's clearly not the first time he's had to explain this in the wake of Rockstar's western



OPPORTUNITY BLOCKS

FROM THE ASHES OF GRUNGY CAR COMBAT COMES AN MMO UNIVERSE BUILT FROM EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE PLAYTHINGS

Click. Clack. Crack. Lego is about improvisation and original thinking, putting bricks together or breaking them apart to suit your mood. It's about creation, building, and US developer NetDevil has built itself up from a five-man team to a 100-strong phalanx. Our story begins with a former Navy SEAL, **Mark Hansen**, Lego's senior director on *Lego Universe*, and a visit to Denmark which saw him secure funding for a Lego MMOG. Having secured the cash, the real work was just about to start.

"The investigative process to find a developer was a lot of work – it started in 2005 and was the result of five, six years of work and consumer research prior to that," Hansen reveals. "The project was called *Lego World Online* at that point. We sent emails out to developers worldwide, and visited about 51 different developers." What Hansen and co didn't expect, however, was that they'd need to sift through some blockheads to find their men: "One guy we went to propped his feet up on the table and said: 'Give me ten million dollars and get out of my office'."

NetDevil's most recent stab at an MMOG, *Auto Assault*, was



TITLE: **LEGO UNIVERSE**
FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER: **NETDEVIL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**



Boss battles rear their head and are best fought with friends and a mixture of classes. The scale and animations are spectacular and as colourful as expected

From top: creative director Ryan Seabury, lead concept artist Jim Stigall, technical director Erik Urdang and director Mark Hansen, from Lego

by no means a success story, and the exodus from that project and publisher NCSoft, to Lego, was one that creative director **Ryan Seabury** embraced: "*Lego Universe* was really the light at the end of the tunnel of our time on that project. There were a number of factors involved in what happened [to *Auto Assault*], but it's all lessons learned." Some of those lessons are precisely what attracted Hansen's missionaries to the Colorado-based studio: "When we saw the beta [of *Auto Assault*] we noticed they were using physics and we thought, 'Wow'. What was impressive when we visited them was that they were taking the brick into consideration before the game. With prior companies they told us they knew what would make a good game, but they couldn't express what makes a good Lego game."

And what qualities make a good Lego MMORPG? "A lot of MMOG studios these days are chasing the 800lb gorilla. We're positioning ourselves closer to *Club Penguin* than *World Of Warcraft*," says Seabury. And when we sit down with *Lego Universe*, for starters, it's instantly accessible. There are chimes of Traveller's Tales' colourful animations and an interface that's bright, bold and easy to navigate. If Nintendo made MMOGs, they might look a bit like this. "I think of it as an MMOG-lite," says Seabury as we bounce around one of the many worlds that tier progress into traditional levels. There's a linearity that smacks of a singleplayer platformer rather than an open-world RPG, and NetDevil has clearly scaled back much of the grind-work the genre often thirsts for. It's obvious, from both the pace and vibrancy of the world, that NetDevil's influences extend beyond the expected MMOG territory and branch into more visually dynamic IP. "Specifically we picked *Wind Waker* as one of the main *Zelda*s to look at, partially for the art style but mostly for the world design and the way that Link advanced in that one," says Seabury. "You play through different areas but just because you've done it once doesn't mean there's not stuff to do and other items and abilities to unlock when you come back. It keeps the progress flat but the content remains relevant and you are advancing your character. The way you advance isn't like in a typical RPG – you're gaining hearts and getting tougher. Your breadth of capabilities is expanding." In the shape-shifting world of free-to-play MMOGs where *Club Penguin* is a social hub and *Maple Story* has over 100m accounts, the linearity of *Lego Universe* is a wild card that will simultaneously stand out from the pack and be familiar to young console gamers.

"WE PICKED WIND WAKER TO LOOK AT, PARTLY FOR THE ART STYLE BUT MOSTLY FOR THE WORLD DESIGN"

For a major investment MMOG with eyes on a global audience, it's telling that there are no elves or orcs littering *Lego Universe*. The Lego foundations provide ample opportunity for whatever-you-desire genre mixtures, but NetDevil has trodden carefully in its aesthetic choices. The rigidity of the design constraints that a proud franchise like Lego demands was, ironically, a liberation for Seabury's team: "One problem with *Auto Assault* was that our concept was really all over the place. It didn't excite people in a one-liner. You had to explain the idea to people before they got it. That spiralled out into a lot more marketing trying to make people understand."

There's a keenness to stand apart as an MMOG on its own two studs and allow the users to brand *Lego Universe* first. That branding, if not entirely achievable with arm-popping, skin-spraying powers, is done with a mass of pre-ordained options. With four slots for avatars – or 'minifigs' – it's likely you'll spend a good portion of time in the character creation menu switching duds and swapping heads.

The conservative screening and approving of designs is inherent to such a protected, established

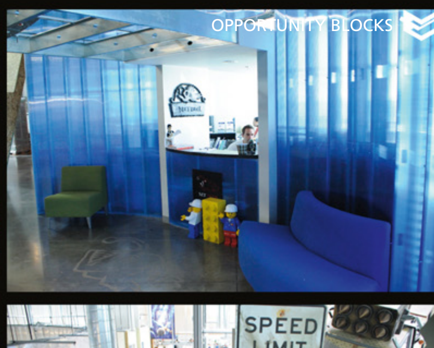


Post-launch, the game's many minigames will be updated over time. The most striking of the range we've tried so far is a surprisingly engaging racer





NetDevil has one of the five largest Lego collections worldwide, with the capacity for ten million pieces. It's not just a novelty; it's an imperative part of the studio's concept and design processes







IP, but it may be rather a millstone for *Universe*'s customisation options. Though user-generated content comes into play, the fact that you can't engineer your own decals, or coats of arms, feels like a sad omission. It's a minor thing, but accentuated by the emergence of projects like the Build-A-Bear online venture that ties its physical product to an online MMOG-alike. Build-A-Bear – a DIY teddy bear manufacturer currently invading UK retail spaces – isn't the only manufacturer with its eyes on connecting the virtual and real shopping experiences. Fashion Playtes – a girls' clothes manufacturer – recently announced an online game that allows users to design outfits in-game which are then available for purchase and order from the physical store. It's a concept that's on the *Universe* project's itinerary, and regardless of the competition, Seabury remains optimistic: "With Lego the concept can actually go even wider, but it makes sense because Lego is the thread tying it all together. Lego can encompass all things. It can go anywhere."

Universe has been informed by extensive research: during our visit a focus test is conducted in which a ten-year-old is monitored as he tackles the opening section of the game. Via one-way glass and cameras installed throughout the test area, designers study the child's play style, the placement of his hands on the keyboard and the pitfalls of his progress. If the child struggles to navigate a scenario, the issue is raised among the design team. It's an exhaustive approach to QA, and crucial to understanding the thinking patterns of NetDevil's core audience.

That audience – 12-year-olds form the core demographic of *Universe* – may call for a simplistic design approach but it also demands advanced security and moderation. The potential to cause moral chaos with the inanimate bricks is a big challenge, and it means that every single user-created model in *Lego Universe* will be screened as and when it's constructed. Technical director **Erik Urdang** will certainly have his work cut out: "We moderate models and properties. We're going to be running 24/7 groups. What we don't want is what you have in *Second Life* where everyone goes to see 'Fred's Evil World'." The hurdles don't stop there: "We also have text to consider. There are certain words you can and can't say. But there are also patterns you can have with words that are OK.

THE BUILDING TRADE



Also helping in the design process are the Lego World Builder League members. Many employed full-time and on-site, the World Builders are professional fans, recruited to design and demo creations and ultimately implement them in the game. In honour of their efforts, they also have their own dedicated lobbies in-game, showcasing their inventions and mastery of the block for the public. One such World Builder, Duane Hess (left), explains his career leap: "I had been working for six years for an office supply company, doing all their warehouse design. Lego was my hobby. I'd gotten involved with the online community. I was starting to take pictures of what I would make [with Lego] for people to see on Flickr, without knowing I was building a portfolio. One day out of the blue I got an email saying: 'How would you like to do this full-time?'" Hess is also adamant that this project isn't a move towards replacing the physical product: "I think if anything it will supplement the physical brick. What I've seen and heard from playtesters and kids I've run in to at public events, where they've tested *Lego Universe*, is they'll play through the quest and when they're tired of playing the game they'll go back to their room and build it for real."





Your Lego minifig can also tame, train and master a pet. These range in their rarity and coolness, from standard cats and dogs to more exotic lions and stranger beasts



The influences on *Lego Universe* are many and varied, from *Animal Crossing* and *LittleBigPlanet* to *Club Penguin* and *Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*

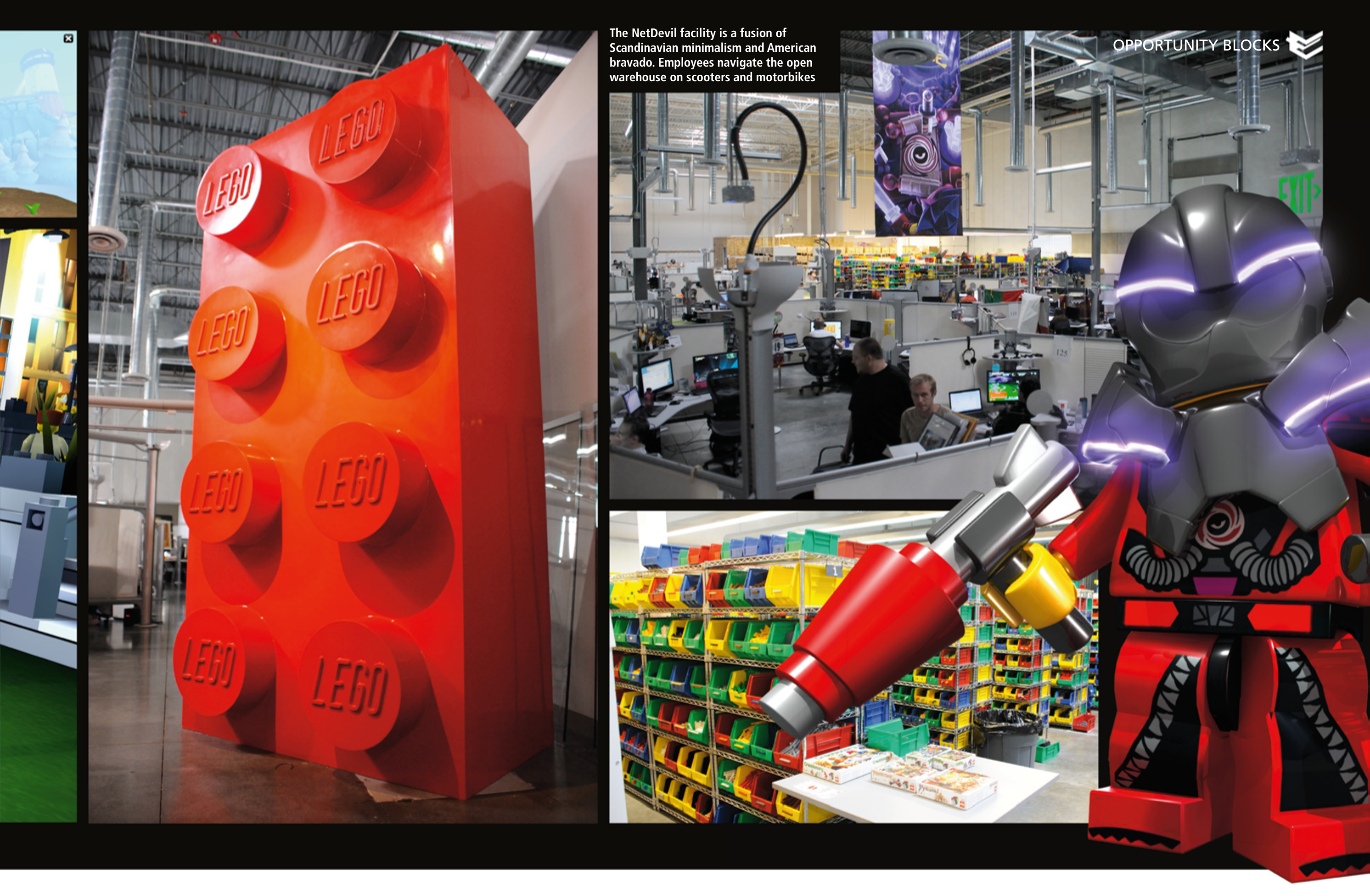
CONNECTING THE BLOCKS

Mark Hansen is aware of the suggestions that *Lego Universe* may be a bid to replace the physical bricks with virtual ones, but he's able to look at it in a historical context: "In 1960, there was a huge fire in the Lego warehouse where they manufactured wooden and plastic bricks. All of the wood was destroyed so they decided only to continue with plastic. People have said we're doing the same. I don't see it like that. When I grew up in America you would go into a suburb and kids would be out in the streets, playing baseball. Nowadays the streets are empty. It's about giving little Peter a place he can go all of his own and play with others without his mother having to worry and look over his shoulder."

'How old are you?' for example – that's OK [on its own]. But if you see that and then 'where do you live?' a couple of lines later then you have to ask: what's going on here? We have software from a company called Crisp Thinking that will be doing analysis." Crisp Thinking provides high-end security and moderation technology for online games – its NetModerator technology specifically deals with MMOGs and the uptake has been huge (SOE and Nexon are just two of the names running Crisp).

In step with the pared-down design, levelling in *Lego Universe* is dictated only by items. Level one items are all retail Lego favourites – think pirates, knights, astronauts – with levels two and three the point at which the art team steps in with its own improvisations. Treading carefully around the Lego boundaries for character creation has meant constant iteration (and rejection), as lead concept artist **Jim Stigall** explains: "We've gone over and over different style guides with Lego – how they use colours, for example. When you come up with something unique, though, as long as it fits their style guides, they're happy. They give us feedback to the millimetre." More traditional factions rear their heads later on, but so too do unusually high-quality minigames, such as the racing section demoed for us which looks as polished as some retail – and certainly many DLC – releases.

Regardless of Lego's potential, it's noteworthy that *Universe* hasn't gone for the marketing jugular of licensed material in the Traveller's Tales vein. Though it's not a 'build anything, anywhere' campaign, the ace up *Lego Universe*'s sleeve is what's tentatively called the 'property world system'. Earning your own floating island in the plastic galaxy is where the story really begins – and populating it with scavenged items, buildings, creatures and friends is where you write your own tale. Constructing your world is a simple cut-and-paste exercise, with pieces harnessed and dumped by your avatar in thirdperson. Having designed your house, castle or any number of bizarre hybrids, your next task is to program its 'behaviour'. At first sight, the behaviours menu looks like a children's version of Final Cut Pro, allowing you to piece together actions and reactions for anything in your scenario. See that chicken strutting around the castle gates? Touch it (behaviour one), watch it sprint for its life (behaviour two) and then see it trigger a roaring dragon inside



The NetDevil facility is a fusion of Scandinavian minimalism and American bravado. Employees navigate the open warehouse on scooters and motorbikes

the walls (behaviour three). See that dragon…? You get the idea. It's a fast, fun approach to UGC that forms the backbone of Lego's universe. With capacity for 50,000 concurrent users on any one server, the possibility for exploration and discovery, for creation and communication, is epic. As Seabury enthuses: "It gives the grind meaning." Whether grind, meaningful or otherwise, is essential to a youth-oriented MMOG is another question – and it has to be said that the fixed points for vehicle and item creation will feel restrictive to anyone who's dabbled with Banjo's nuts and bolts or *Free Realms*' 'whatever, whenever' approach.

The Lego group itself has expanded into Colorado, sending envoys, advisors and directors to help. It's a cooperative rather than a dictatorship, with Lego a constant aid in ensuring content is measured against the company's precise yardstick. "As a thirdparty publisher you work to milestones," says Seabury, "and you won't get paid until you meet them. With Lego, they fund us – they can pull the plug at any time. Rather than focus on an ancient list of bullet points, we meet every six weeks, and milestones can change between meetings." It's a system that clearly fits the ever-changing environment of MMOG development and moderation, and one that holds NetDevil's grand ambitions for *Lego Universe* – as an online hub for one of the world's biggest brands – in good stead.

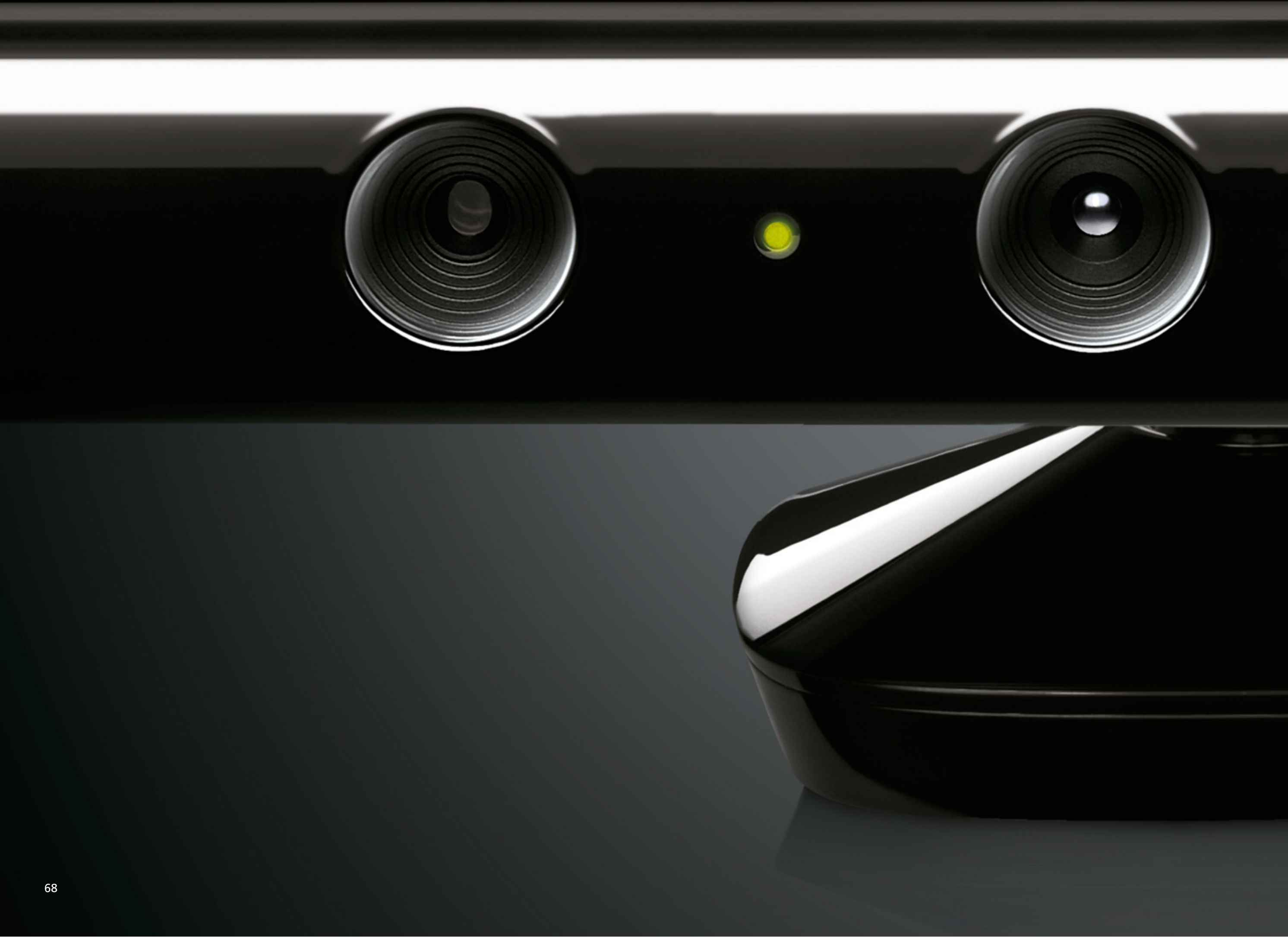
"WITH CAPACITY FOR 50,000 USERS ON ANY ONE SERVER, THE POSSIBILITY FOR CREATION AND COMMUNICATION IS EPIC"

Keeping things simple in terms of story was another major draw for Lego. NetDevil's pitch is a traditional good/evil yarn about the stream of pure imagination's corruption by the sinister maelstrom, a story that's easily swallowed in bite-sized cutscenes. It also side-steps the minefield of allowing children to be 'bad': every human *Universe* player is a good, yellow minifig. That means no PVP for now, but there are plans to iterate and implement a wealth of modes and mods as the title expands.

In a way, Lego was a physical progenitor of the microtransaction model that has had a transformative effect on gaming, so it's surprising to find the publisher playing it straight with a $10/month subscription model. The underlying reasons for this monetisation are linked directly to security, founded on the belief that subscribers are less likely to be troublemakers, as Seabury explains: "Free-to-play also implies a large set of anonymous users, and as all of us know in the online world, anonymity tends to result in anti-social or disruptive behaviour. This would only complicate our particular case. We'd rather have a community that's serious about having fun and creating a safe, encouraging place for families to play together. Given all that, and Lego's brand values and brand recognition, we didn't see any real benefit to the game experience of creating a free-to-play model for *Lego Universe*."

As free-to-play models explode and more publishers put younger gamers in their crosshairs, the *Lego Universe* team will need thick skins as well as wallets. The presence of a 'ten-year plan' footnote under the NetDevil logo on design docs suggests there are big ambitions here but the optimism is tempered by Hansen's honesty: "Of course we're prepared to struggle. It's a learning process. We learned early on – thanks to Ryan and the team – that we couldn't rush this out in two years." But with all the pieces in place, it's hard not to be impressed by Lego's debut in the MMOG world. On the evidence of what we've seen, NetDevil could be on the verge of a blockbuster for a brand that's certainly built to last. But, like everything, the real test will come when the kids get their hands on it – and immediately set about trying to take it all apart.

MOVE











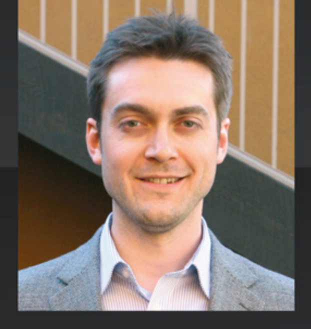
XBOX 360

HOW KINECT AIMS TO CHANGE GAMES FOR EVER, FOR EVERYONE

Don't call it Kinectic (even for a jape). Don't call it Natal. And definitely don't call it the new *Viva Piñata*. Since its announcement in 2009, Kinect has been called plenty of things. It was 'brilliant' and 'the future' at first, but recently all the talk's been about whether you can play it sitting down (you can), lying down (ditto), or its lag (read on). How did talk about Kinect, in the game industry at least, get so bogged down in detail?

Q&A: DAVID SEYMOUR

SENIOR PRODUCER, BIGPARK



We first saw *Joy Ride* as an XBLA title – what's changed for Kinect?
The core of the game was completely rebuilt for Kinect. It has its own rhythm, its own intensity. From the first moment when we realised, "Oh, this will work! This is what it will be like to drive the car", it was a huge do-over from a player direction point of view, and all those tracks were built for Kinect.

In the absence of physical feedback, do you compensate?
We over-index on visual feedback. People get engrossed in what is actually happening with the output of their actions and what they're doing – so we literally get a form of attention blindness where they're so into the zone of what they're doing with their body and what they're watching that car do: if we put a HUD element on the screen they don't even see it. I mean literally don't even see it. We had to move a huge amount of that feedback into the character and player space.

Did focus group testing change a lot of the design?
When you take people and say, "Hey, grab a steering wheel in the air and start driving", what that means is so different. We ended up addressing at least five types of steering. You have people who we call 'milkers', who just pump their hands up and down vertically. You've got 'gunslingers' who point with their fingertips and rotate their shoulders. You have a very large group of people, especially younger kids, who lock their hands around an imaginary wheel, but then rotate their shoulders, twist their body back and forth. And you have people who lean – the list goes on and on. Our steering model is a composite that accommodates about five different kinds of body input, and any one of those things can relate to the idea of steering a car.

What about user fatigue?
Some people walk up and hold their arms stick-straight in front of them. That's going to cause incredible fatigue in the shoulders – so the game progressively gives feedback that you don't want to be doing that. You can't boost like that. It's tiny prompts so that generally people will find their way into a position that we think is comfortable. We took a session-play approach, kept our lap counts short and our minigame sessions short, and then looked at biomechanical feedback so that you're not going to exhaust yourself or strain yourself. And that's just prudent: body-play design is going to require that consideration for what is going to be exhausting or strenuous.

What Microsoft says Kinect contains: "An RGB camera, depth sensor and multi-array microphone running proprietary software." What this does: 3D motion capture of your entire body, with an insignificant margin of error, that works in any ambient light conditions. What this means: it automatically calibrates depending on where you are (via an automated pivot), tracks your body, and recognises your face and voice. It can fully track two players, and can sense four more – though what the latter means in practical terms is yet to be demonstrated. Its ease of use can't be overstated. When playing *Kinect Adventures*, we're joined by a second player, the view splits and he appears onscreen. It's instant.

We've spent time with Kinect, and we've watched other people try it. The hesitant walk-on, the first wavings as they settle in, and then just a big smile. It works. There have been grumblings around Kinect's capabilities, which we'll come to shortly, but that key point needs emphasising: when you first stand in front of this device, it's like nothing else.

Our first go didn't begin for almost a minute.





There wasn't anything wrong – we were simply waving our hands in order to see our avatar do the same. It's a spooky thrill seeing your body so well imitated on screen, and simply incomparable to things like Sony's PlayStation Eye. Bowling, surely an over-familiar activity, is interesting again now we know you can throw overarm and straight out from the chest – just by doing it. *Kinect Adventures*' sidesteps have less room for improvisation, but we're still fascinated by that little avatar doing them in time with us. There's no faking movements, either: after a few hurdles sessions you'll definitely be sweating. It's an experience so immersive that you temporarily forget about strangers watching and concentrate on moving. There's a genuine sense that you're on the screen. It's what Apple would call 'magical'.

Cynics prefer another term: casual. The Kinect launch line-up is clearly designed to introduce the technology gently, a mix of familiar genres transformed by the hardware's capabilities. But even to say that is a little unfair. There have been virtual pets before, *EyePet* perhaps the most comparable, but *Kinectimals*

KINECT JOY RIDE

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **BIGPARK** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

When it was an XBLA title, *Joy Ride* was a direct competitor to *ModNation Racers* that would give Xbox Live its own island of Play, Create, Share. With the move to Kinect has come a move to full price, and what was a standard kart racer now has simpler elements. But you control it by pretending to steer. And it's much more responsive than you might expect.



It's also gentle to new players: the tracks are very wide, and mechanics like drifting are much more forgiving than in comparable games. But these margins for error, at least when you're playing it for the first time, are welcome – the amount that *Joy Ride* extrapolates from the movement of your hands and shoulders is a surprise.

Flail about and you'll do the same on-track. Relax and steer precisely and that's what happens, while leaning gently into corners is enough to start and control a powerslide. More outlandish gestures are required occasionally – pulling your hands into your chest and pushing them out again to boost, or swaying about for air tricks – but the comfort and sensitivity of *Joy Ride*'s bread-and-butter controls are its real surprise. It's no *Forza 3*, of course, and if you're a petrolhead you'll always be better off with a steering wheel. But as a simple, fun take on an established genre, it's a marker for the hardware.



Q&A: DAVID BRABEN

CHAIRMAN, FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS

What happened to never working with children or animals?
[Laughs] Well, we've done it before. We've had a lot of games that appeal to a family audience. I think it's very easy, in our sort of insular way, to concentrate on an ever-smaller group of people who are remarkably like us and we all get terribly terribly introspective. It's a very healthy thing to go for a broad audience. I think [Frontier's 2003 PS2 game] *Dog's Life* was a bit before its time. The reception we got was almost… I wouldn't say sneering, but seen as, 'How dare you aim for a kiddie audience or a broad audience? We want firstperson shooters, thank you very much'.

Were there any surprises when you invited children to test the game?
Where we've been bringing in friends and family is some of the most useful testing because you really do get an honest opinion – from seeing where kids get stuck, or from seeing where kids absolutely adore it. And petting is one of those things, which is why we put it front and centre of the demo. It's immediate, and it's very intuitive.

Kids get stuck in places you'd never expect. We take for granted how we are used to really quite complicated user interfaces. I've known a lot of people who are absolutely not gamers, people like my parents for example, and the controller is just too complicated, too many buttons, and they can't be bothered with the learning experience. The attraction of Kinect is it is very intuitive, and as game designers we have to re-tune ourselves to design for the simplicity people expect.

The launch games are generally adding the controls to familiar game concepts. How important is it to offer entirely new experiences?
It's new hardware, so the lead time you've got for launch is not as long as other games. We saw it with Wii, I'm sure we'll see something similar with Move… The point is to get things out there, to say, "This is how it does it – isn't it great?" An obvious one is Harmonix's *Dance Central*. You've got nothing to hold, nothing strapped to you – you just dance. Isn't that great? Amazing! There are so many things we can do here,



and people talk as if you've lost the controller. You haven't! It's still there! You can still use that as well if you want. It's a pretty good launch line-up, when you consider it's a launch line-up, but that doesn't mean there won't be things that aren't going to be better – whatever your value of better is – for the core audience and the new audience down the line.

What was it about Kinect that made you want to get Frontier involved?
Microsoft's commitment to it was very heartening. A lot of people have stuck their necks out for this. To do something very brave and new is fantastic. I think that needs embracing. And we've got to a point with graphics and sound where the tweaks are marginal – the limiting factors now are elsewhere. Like emotional engagement. What are the blocks to emotional engagement? There are large sections of the world that are seriously put off by the complexities of what we make. And I think with Kinect we will gradually see more and better ways of engaging that are unique, that are not just heritages from before.



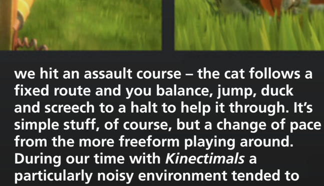
XBOX 360

KINECTIMALS

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**







Let's put it this way: if you're planning on getting Kinect, and you live in the same house as children, get *Kinectimals*.

It begins with a simple acclimatisation exercise in which you call out a cat from a range of gorgeous creatures with exquisitely puffed-up fur, and choose a particular breed, before naming and petting the animal. Then you get to play.

***Kinectimals* illustrates that not having a controller in your hands means that you can do things with your fingers other than hold a controller. When you're stroking the cat, tickling around the back of its ear with your digits or rubbing its flanks with an open palm, it's an oddly convincing sensation. The animal's responses capture your attention and, by the time you're standing on one leg and watching it do the same on two, Frontier has won.**

After teaching Pliskin a few poses, we hit an assault course – the cat follows a fixed route and you balance, jump, duck and screech to a halt to help it through. It's simple stuff, of course, but a change of pace from the more freeform playing around. During our time with *Kinectimals* a particularly noisy environment tended to drown out voice commands, but this will hardly be an issue when it's in your living room – and everything else was cute and polished, the animation and responses of the cats its real triumph. If the wider structure does enough to keep short attention spans transfixed, *Kinectimals* could represent some kind of revolution for Xbox 360 as a kid-friendly console.

Q&A: SHANNON LOFTIS

STUDIO HEAD, GOOD SCIENCE STUDIO

During our *Kinect Adventures* demo we were told: "They're not minigames, they're adventures". Why?
When we built the game we looked at entertainment around the world and things that work well and things that we liked, and we didn't restrict ourselves to just looking at videogames. Pixar movies have something for everybody. And so we tried to design the adventures themselves on the same model – every adventure has something for every different kind of brain dominance, every kind of thought process, so while the individual activities themselves are what you would call minigames, we combine all the different levels together. They're a whole brain, whole body, whole family experience.



Involving lots of focus group tests?
We've been in user tests for two years now. The first prototypes that we put together, we actually didn't have the sensor working or any software – our prototypes were all physical. This is the team that built the Ricochet tech demo and I know it sounds goofy, but we were literally out in a playground with red rubber balls, bouncing them against the walls to start prototyping. And then when we started doing things like River Rush, we had people come into a room and cooperate on in-room navigation and that sort of thing. Another thing we did that I haven't done before is adopted a sociological behavioural model. We particularly admire companies like Disney, Pixar and MTV for their flexibility.

Nintendo?
[Laughs] Yes, of course Nintendo, because of their ability to create experiences that appeal to everybody. We learned that one of their tools is called the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument. It's basically a thought model and it splits the population up into four brain dominances, and so we had one of the Herrman experts come in and help us filter our ideas to make sure that we had cross-brain coverage. We even actually hired our team using HBDI typing.

So the grand goal is making the fun bits more intuitive to more people?
One of the reasons why the earliest games for Kinect are completely full-body, and we wanted to design a gameplay mechanic that is completely intuitive and very obvious, is so that we're not guessing what the user intent is. So all of our mechanics within *Kinect Adventures* are non-gestural, in that you're not learning an arcane gesture library. We're not trying to teach a new language. We put a ball in front of your hand and you're going to want to hit it.







KINECT ADVENTURES

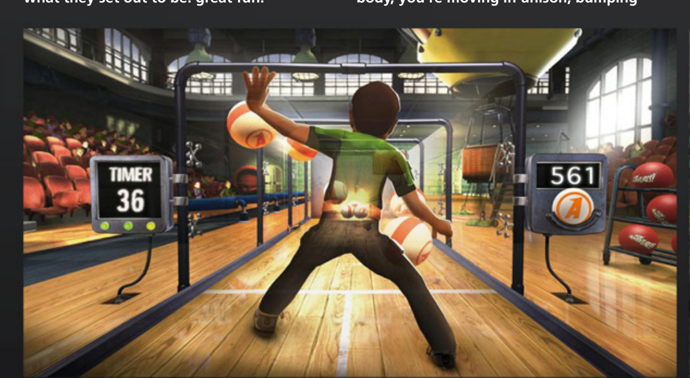
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **GOOD SCIENCE STUDIO** RELEASE: **DATE: NOVEMBER**

The bête noir of the Kinect launch line-up, poor old *Adventures* has taken its knocks for daring to be simple. It certainly is: the three games we play involve easy-to-understand motions, like ducking and sidestepping, that are used to control relatively straightforward games. Ultimately, they're precisely what they set out to be: great fun.

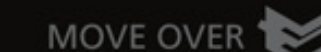
Every game mode we've seen thus far can be played with two players, and they're presented such that a child – or more importantly, a cynical adult – knows what to do. Rafting's a co-op ride in which you sidestep and jump to guide the raft into tokens and on to alternate routes. With a controller, it would be a breeze. With the body, you're moving in unison, bumping into each other and generally not caring much about the linear course.

Mine-carting is a little more intense, its head-to-head nature and the addition of a jump boost adding a little more spice and exertion to a similarly straightforward obstacle course. Our only doubt concerns Rally Ball, in which the responses of your onscreen avatar feel a fraction delayed. Good Science Studio insists optimisation is ongoing, and will be until release.

That aside, *Kinect Adventures* is a necessary title for the launch line-up. It's simple, it's entertaining, and you can easily imagine putting it on for 20 minutes when family or friends are visiting. If the rest of the package is up to scratch, you'll certainly get your money's worth.







is so gorgeously involving it's of a different breed. *Kinect Sports* and *Adventures* may not be outlandish concepts, but again the execution is so slick and engaging that they have immediate appeal to all. With *Dance Central*, Kinect has the one developer you can guarantee will knock that concept out of the park.

AS FOR KINECT HAVING DIFFICULTY 'SEEING' USERS SITTING OR LYING DOWN, WE'RE ASSURED THAT ANYTHING THE CAMERA CAN VIEW, DEVELOPERS CAN CODE FOR – INCLUDING PRESS-UPS IN A FITNESS GAME

Microsoft doesn't have the greatest track record in broadening software, but the Kinect launch line-up is a step change in quality. The games may not interest people who have an Xbox 360 right now, but they'll interest people who've never heard of an Xbox before.

Trying to broaden your market is, of course, guaranteed to cause concern among your current audience, and there's already been plenty of negative things said about Kinect. But there are more substantial concerns about the hardware, namely lag, the matter of playing position, and price. Each issue's distinct, but right now only one feels like a sizeable issue.

During play, you do notice a delay – more noticeable in particular games – between your movements and their onscreen realisation. When the *Kinect Adventures* game Rally Ball gets faster, for example, it can feel like your flails aren't perfectly mirrored. So there's a case to answer, and elsewhere on this page **Kudo Tsunoda** addresses it from Microsoft's perspective. In practical terms, and in the context of the Kinect games we've played, such delays simply don't spoil the experience. Importantly, the physical connection you feel with the onscreen visuals isn't broken. Also, the difference between response times across individual launch games makes it clear that it's a complex issue, not a black-and-white one. Ultimately, all of the launch games we've experienced track the player well, and the process will only be further optimised in future.

As for Kinect having difficulty 'seeing' users sitting or lying down, we're assured that anything the camera can view, developers can code for – including press-ups in a fitness game, for example. If a game is designed to be played standing up, it may well not work if you try to play it sitting down, so those accustomed to 'cheating' their way through certain Wii games will simply have to get stuck in properly.

Finally, there's the issue of price. A standalone Kinect will cost £130 in the UK



XBOX 360

Q&A: KUDO TSUNODA

GENERAL MANAGER, MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS

Let's draw a line under the issue of playing Kinect games while seated.
So the platform supports being able to play standing up or doing things while you're seated. I guess some of that comes from the experience we've been showing – they're the full-bodied, standing up things. Everything we're doing with Kinect is about being accessible and getting people into play without reading instructions. You can do stuff standing up, you can do stuff sitting down, it just depends on the experience. It's tailored around giving the users the best experience.

So it depends on what a particular game wants to track?
Exactly – developers can put into their own experience what they think works best for them and what they're trying to do.

What about a final word on lag?
From a technical perspective, obviously there is lag in controller games. With Kinect it's not a function of the technology as it is playing a game where you are so immersed because of the full body experience, you feel like you're really playing the game.

When we looked at research for Kinect we saw sometimes that if a person is running down a track and a hurdle is coming up, people will wait until the hurdle comes to where their body is outside of the TV as opposed to where their avatar is in the game. It's a testament to how immersive these experiences are that people will gauge responses on their own position in the world versus a game character. Understanding the visual cues and the better things we can do as developers to match that up is part of the process.

How will you be updating the standard development tools?
Kinect is like any other part of the platform: we're always updating developer tools so they can build different kinds of content. Kinect will evolve over time – it's like Live. Xbox Live looks so much different now than it did two or three years ago. I think it's the exact same thing as everything that's going to go on with Kinect.

What about smaller developers – are they going to be able to afford to develop Kinect games?
With the Kinect platform you get the full body tracking, you're getting all the great voice stuff, the human identification stuff. All this comes as part of the platform. Developers don't have to build it themselves, so all they have to worry



about is what the user is doing and how that correlates to the game action. So this is a small percentage of your development cost. Kinect is no more cost prohibitive than developing on anything else.

Will we see Kinect games on the Xbox Indie Games channel?
Sure. Of course.

Do you have a timescale in mind?
Obviously we're just focusing on the launch games at the moment. But you're going to hear more – it's a big part of Xbox. Indie games are a big part of the platform, and timelines will come later.

What do you think are the most exciting areas for future development?
The real-world skill is a super-interesting thing to look at. The time we spend with our Xbox can and will help with the rest of our lives. This is a big area going forward with Kinect.

Human recognition is a rich area to play with. This is technology built for that purpose, and there's a whole area to play around in with human recognition stuff. In *Kinectimals*, for example – one of our awesome, sweetest, cutest games, where you build an emotional connection – the sign-in process became a big part of this. Think of it this way: if you have a dog it's gonna react differently to you than it does me. You can start developing a shared set of experiences and memories between you and game characters. To start developing experiences around allowing you to interact with characters, not just in the moment, but over time – I think that's an awesome, rich area to play in.

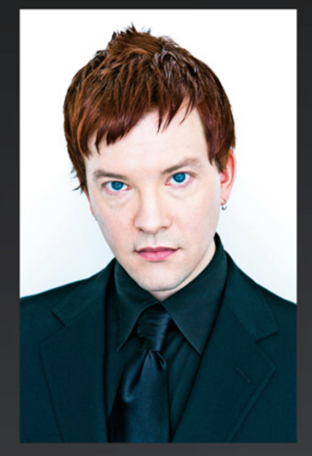
Q&A: KASSON CROOKER

PROJECT LEAD ON DANCE CENTRAL, HARMONIX

What do you track in *Dance Central* – are you following all 20 joints? And what about Kinect's mic?
The *Dance Central* mapping technology follows all 20 possible joints, enabling the game to score players on even very intricate dance moves. We don't actually use the microphone – the game is based entirely on body movement.

Is there a difference in what you track when two players are dancing in battle mode?
We'll be releasing more information on our twoplayer mode in the coming months, but I can say that it uses the same technology and sensoring.

What's your overall impression of Kinect right now?
It's a huge jump forward in videogame technology, in our opinion. The technological leap in the tracking software really brings a degree of accuracy necessary for us to legitimately track the dancer and offer the most



authentic dance experience possible. Rather than holding a controller or dancing on a pad with sensors, the player is actually the controller, using technology that has never been put to use in such a fun way before. For *Dance Central* especially, this was key. It gives the player the feeling of truly dancing and trying to learn choreography rather than just 'playing along'.

Will it be possible to create true 1:1 tracking in a dancing game?
Dance Central actually is 1:1. You're dancing, in realtime, with the character, following his or her movements as if you're in a mirror. If you perform a move correctly, the character's body lights up and your surroundings change. If you perform a move incorrectly, the character will turn red. If you're supposed to put your left hand over your head and you don't, the character's left hand, over his or her head, will turn red, showing you what you're doing incorrectly.

and $150 in the US, though Microsoft has come up with a bundle deal that will ease the pain to new 360 users, a move clearly designed to undercut Sony. The £250 deal (comprising a 4GB 360S, Kinect and *Kinect Adventures*) certainly looks attractive against a PS3 Move bundle, but Nintendo clearly maintains the advantage when it comes to cost-conscious consumers.

Though Kinect will be faced off against Wii and Sony's Move, these are not an apples-for-apples comparisons. Nintendo and Sony are the closest competitors, with Microsoft intent on carving out a new space. Sony is banking on an increasing hunger for HD visuals and an improvement in motion-sensing technology to attract Wii owners looking to upgrade. Its momentum may have slowed, but Nintendo has an installed base of approximately double that of Sony, and it's this additional audience that Move has been positioned to capture. Microsoft's approach is betting otherwise, saying that any controller at all is a controller too many, and that Nintendo's expanded audience perhaps isn't so expanded after all.





DANCE CENTRAL

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

In the flesh, it's just cool. There's no question mark about Harmonix any more: it's the Pixar of the rhythm action genre, and you can bet this has been in the works a long time. A standout in Kinect's launch line-up, *Dance Central*'s accessible the first second you see it: music plays, and the moves you've got to do pop up at the side of the screen.

How it works carries on from the studio's music games. As the moves appear you have a set window in which to perform them: you can do them flawlessly, or if you're a bit out an onscreen limb goes red to show the offending appendage. There's a multiplier when you're doing well, and five stars to fill on the jukebox. Playing on easy means we have no idea how accurate the tracking gets (the in-game characters have set animations, rather than following your exact movements), but the flow of the thing is amazing.

It's a Harmonix game on a new piece of kit that happens to suit the concept perfectly. It's going to be brilliant, right?





Kinect has an instantaneous appeal that, allied to the simple games of its launch line-up, could attract a lot of people who still, even despite Nintendo's efforts, perceive videogames as being too complicated. Whether it will be put in front of enough of them is the question.

But Kinect's marketing is one thing; its potential for games is quite another. How it will fit with traditionally popular genres is an issue in itself, a concern encapsulated by the words of Sony's pretend VP of everything, **Kevin Butler**: "Who wants to use their hands like a gun?"

The truth is, unlike Sony, which has made it as easy as possible to retro-fit existing PS3 games with Move functionality, Microsoft is focused on making Kinect games exist on their own, unbounded terms.

An arms-out flying game in a perfectly modelled New York. A downloadable Chatroulette-style quick-draw over Live. Sherlock Holmes, using coercion rather than bullets. Star Trek with you, the commander, controlling everything from the bridge. Party game Mafia online. *Steel Battalion 2* mapping

a cockpit display onscreen to your sofa's arms. *Age Of Empires* through Caesar's eyes. *Milo And Kate*. When you're not tied up thinking about how Kinect can be made to handle the things we've been doing in games for years, the ideas floodgate opens.

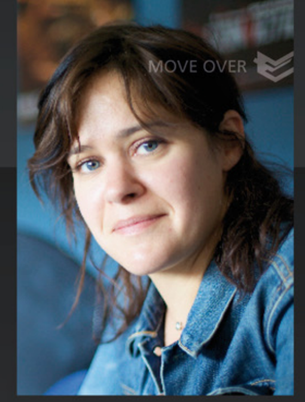
Kinect will supplement traditional games, of course, and a rash of titles will follow in the wake of *Fable III*, which will offer unique features to appropriately kitted-out users. But how about a ghost story directed by Suda-51, built around the idea that Kinect can see you and your reactions at all times? A LucasArts firstperson Indiana Jones adventure that mixes *Mirror's Edge* and *Time Crisis*? A stealth game in which you have to hide as enemies look out of your screen? How about poker? And what on Earth is someone like Hideo Kojima going to do with Kinect?

Alongside all of this potential, we shouldn't lose sight of the prosaic elements such as usability. The fact that Kinect recognises the player is a great streamliner, a step towards the eradication of log-in menus. Its voice-control functionality has many layers of potential in itself, and could develop into a search and service tool of huge specificity. How about head tracking in 'normal' games as a standard feature? How do we think about a screen in relation to a game: are you watching something, or looking in?

But it's impossible to put a timeframe on Kinect's potential. Certainly there will be a period of acclimatisation for developers, and Microsoft's claim that it's as cost-effective to work on as any other platform is yet to be proved across the board. One ambiguity concerns the amount of strain Kinect puts on the Xbox 360 CPU. "Obviously if you're trying to run your game and look at these huge depth buffers and colour buffers, that's a damn lot of processing," says **Andrew Oliver** of Blitz Game Studios. "You can put it across the shaders, but it's pretty hardcore programming to turn a depth buffer into a skeleton. What you tend to do is write all your algorithms, get it all working in C++ code, and when you're happy it works you'll find the game is running so slow. And then you have to work out how to write that in shaders."

Q&A: CLAUDINE CEZAC

PRODUCER, YOUR SHAPE: FITNESS EVOLVED



Your proprietary 'Player Projection' tech puts the player onscreen – can't Kinect do that on its own?
Kinect does have the ability to display the player as we do, but the image is very noisy and unstable. We chose to dedicate our effort to polishing the Player Projection by reducing the noise as much as possible to get a clean and smooth silhouette while adding the tracking system to it. The results are amazing and allow an experience that is unique and way more immersive.

Are you really tracking a million dots, as your press release claims?
A million dots is a pretty steep number! What we can say for sure is that every dot or pixel that composes the player image is being tracked. The system knows exactly where each of those dots are located in a 3D environment.

Why was one of the claims for *Fitness Evolved* that it had 'no lag'?
With the Player Projection tech, the ultimate goal was to reduce the lag to a level at which the player would no longer perceive it. By putting you in the game as a silhouette, your movements are smoother and are reflected instantly onscreen. Moreover, we are able to remove the lag created by the mechanical feel of an Avatar or character.

Why did you decide to release a Kinect exclusive in the cutthroat fitness game genre?
It's putting the player in the experience. You're not controlling characters. You will physically be able to interact with the virtual objects around you. In order to fully experience that interaction with your environment, we designed the game with a body-centric approach, meaning that everything is adapted to you. To do so, we're using the tracking capability of Kinect to take your measurements and position menus and objects perfectly within reach.

Does what you're wearing matter?
We've tested several pieces of clothing and haven't had any major problems so far. The only real concern about clothing we have is people wearing something with a reflective surface, like sequins or leather. The tracking system is fairly robust. Obviously, if a player decides to cover himself with a blanket and tries to exercise, then the system won't be able to see him move, but I don't think he'll move that much either!



XBOX 360

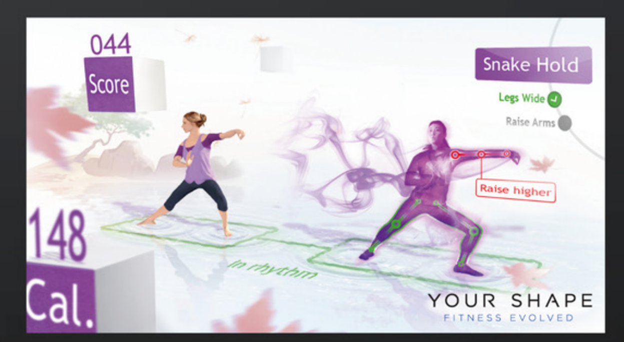
YOUR SHAPE: FITNESS EVOLVED

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

The market for fitness games is gradually being colonised, and Ubisoft's *Your Shape: Fitness Evolved* looks like a heavyweight for Kinect. What the press release calls its 'Player Projection technology' puts a very good approximation of you onscreen – there are fuzzy edges to the image, but incredible fidelity and no significant lag when it's tracking your movements.

More importantly, after the series' rather plain Wii debut, this is a very slick production. The floating menus around your arms are a beautiful touch, and the – dare we say it – more gamey approach to exercising heralded by bolder colours and objective-based workouts has our interest piqued. It uses this visual panache practically, too: in the yoga sessions, bold lines superimposed on your avatar make correcting your posture simple.

As is the new standard, everything's online and shared with your friends, and Ubisoft promises "hundreds of exercises" as well as future DLC. *Fitness Evolved* doesn't quite have a free run – *EA Sports Active 2.0* will be out at roughly the same time, though it's more expensive thanks to a bundled heart monitor and resistance band. Which is great for Kinect: between these two, you'd bet more than a few people will be tempted from their Balance Boards.



Q&A: ANDREW OLIVER

CHIEF TECHNICAL OFFICER, BLITZ GAME STUDIOS

Motion tracking is never completely clean – how good is Kinect?
It's a very clever system that they've got. They look at the depth data, they work out fairly quickly if it's a human, and then they apply their algorithms to give you all the bones or whatever. And if you're standing up in front of it, it kind of works, and now with the new software libraries, if you're sitting down on the sofa, it works. OK, so one big thing that people were questioning was whether you could sit on the sofa. The new libraries work, but there are certain things, like in our fitness game, where you sit on the floor and it kind of gets confused. But the most expensive motion capture systems you can get out there, probably Vicon, you can break those as well, and that's why you employ clean-up animators to go and fill in all the little gaps and stuff like that. So we don't have the luxury of having that offline clean-up ability – we have to do it live. Then I would need to do a software algorithm that kind of works that out. It's just a bit of image processing.

So they've given you a generic piece, which is actually pretty impressive and covers most cases – certainly all the standing up, and now sitting down. You want to go further than that, then do it yourself in software.

Do you see an opportunity there in Kinect middleware?
Yeah, absolutely. I think developers will realise very quickly that actually this is a platform that is going to be very big, and there's a lot of hardcore programming in there that you're going to need for it. To actually write all this stuff is a lot of work – even we've found that it's a lot of work, and we're making several games and are going to license it on to other people, so we believe that it's worth the investment. If you're one studio, or just writing one game, it's a hell of a lot of investment to get one system working, for just one game. So we think the obvious opportunity is middleware.

But where would we be without the middleware of [Kinect's standard] skeletal



system? We'd be knackered, frankly. So that's an invaluable piece of middleware already, but I can list several other pieces of middleware which are starting to layer on top of that.

So Microsoft have given you voice recognition and the skeletal system – you couldn't, as a developer, develop that stuff; it's too hardcore – and then there's a whole load of other bits and pieces that we're developing, which are not as hardcore as those, but they're certainly too hardcore for most developers to contemplate for one title.

A lot of people are being negative about Kinect at the moment...
They don't have a vision.

What will it take to give them that?
Playing with games. You have to see it in front of people, how they play with it, how they have fun. It's what happened with the Wii, but this takes it even one level further.

There were quite a few people who were brand new to videogames who found that the Wii wasn't too intimidating and they would play it – but I can still find some people who found even the Wii a little intimidating. This will get even those people. It's up to the software designers to make it obvious what you're doing. It's a mirror, but behind you is going to be a famous scene and it's up to you to speak the line – so make the concepts easy. You'll never get that from the controller, where there will always be: 'You need to press this button, you need to press that button, you need to do this action'. And fundamentally, that's a bit of a blocker for a lot of people – they just instantly turn off.







Q&A: MARK WHITTEN

CORPORATE VICE PRESIDENT, XBOX LIVE

If you're on our friends list, can we tell Kinect to find Mark Whitten?
Not at launch, but certainly over time. That's part of how you drive complexity down by using Kinect. We've invested a ton in server-driven speech at Microsoft, and you're going to see a bunch of that to come. It won't be there on day one.

What does it do on day one?
It will be incredibly simple for you to find all your Kinect experiences and activate all those with a wave of your hand or by using your voice. If you were to sit there and say "Xbox" it would come up and if you can see a word onscreen you can say it and simply navigate to any of that using your voice.

One of the things that's actually quite cool about Kinect is it can serve as a very simple way to act as a login to my personal profile – it recognises me and it logs me in. I don't have to set it up every single time, I can just have it work in the way I want. And you could have a different set that you might want for you versus your wife.



What can we expect to see from Kinect in the future?
What we're trying to do is to make it very simple for every experience to become social and interactive in unique ways. I think it can't happen without a revolution in how you control those experiences, and that revolution has to be based on a natural user interface. And I think that's what really hits you, right? It's motion, voice and things like that.

What I imagine in the future are things like being able to watch a soccer match, and can I yell because I thought it was a goal? Can I immediately see how the rest of the audience felt about that at the same time? How come I can't use that as input? What you will be able to do with Kinect in the future is – imagine that I'm watching a Premier League game and it sees that I've got a Man United jersey on. Why doesn't it change the commentary to be pro-Man U? Why don't you flip it in with the local commentator versus the global one to get a more personalised experience? Things like that become simple to do in a way that doesn't require the user to go to a lot of effort to figure out how to use our interface.

If you don't want that social experience, can you stop it?
Yes. For sure we're going to be very explicit about what we're doing and give our users great control both in terms of how their content can be shared and what parts of the functionality are enabled or not. Solving for privacy is really about solving for transparency. If you're transparent, and you give control around those things, you allow people to make informed decisions about what they want.

When will we be able to see each other onscreen while dispensing online justice?
Not at launch. We're working on a bunch of communication scenarios, like party mode. Communication and pulling people together is really important.

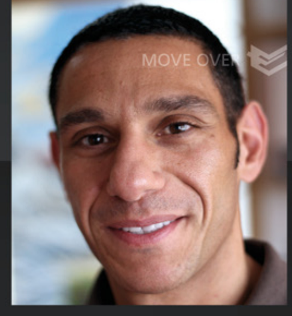
So, using the 360 CPU for handling Kinect as well as core game code will mean that overall performance takes a hit. The solution involves making effective use of the base hardware's powerful ATI GPU. "Obviously we've all been using it for glossy special effects," says Oliver, "but actually we've found that you can do lots of extra processing. A really good example of this is *Kinectimals*: the GPU is doing all the fur rendering, and I can guarantee that it's also doing a lot of image processing too. So it's brilliant that the Xbox has a really good GPU, and can handle both these things, but actually writing that shader code to do image analysis is hardcore coding at its extreme!"

This is all background, of course, to the real story about Kinect. A controller-free interface has always been one of gaming's inevitable futures, and that makes it an honest-to-goodness visionary device. Whether it will become the controller-free interface of today, in terms of selling enough units and playing host to quality software, is another matter. You sense the fires under Kinect haven't yet been lit. That seemed inconceivable back at its breathless E3 2009 reveal, when Lionhead's Milo demo and the sheer newness of it all was thrilling. Even if you're not convinced by the launch line-up, the potential in Kinect's future is undeniable, and Microsoft's internal commitment – something that independent sources as well as company spokespeople emphasise – means incredible resources will be devoted to making it an unavoidable part of the console landscape.

So, why so serious? You're standing in front of a television petting a cat, kicking balls, driving cars and sprinting through a stadium – just by moving. It's fun. And if being a fan of videogames is about anything, surely it's the thrill of new experiences. Of new worlds, new challenges, new characters and new ways of interacting with them. At launch, Kinect will represent a new way of playing games. Soon enough, we'll find out how many doors its capabilities open for electronic entertainment as a whole. Microsoft's vision of the future is based on getting everyone playing first. If it manages that small step, Kinect has the potential to be extraordinary.

Q&A: GEORGE ANDREAS

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, RARE



Going up against Nintendo is a big ask. How do you distinguish *Kinect Sports* from *Wii Sports*?
In terms of looking at the competition, we looked very carefully at *Wii Sports*. We didn't shy away from it – we actually attack it head on, if I'm honest. We looked at *Wii Sports* and, OK, if we were going to do this better, how much further can we go with this and will the consumer see an obvious improvement?

Take bowling: there are quite a few fiddly things to do to get to throwing the actual ball. By taking away a lot of that and just putting your player in that situation it was a big win. The user feedback and user testing said we were coming back as a superior experience, and we added a lot more bells and whistles to the entire thing. We never shied away from the *Wii Sports* comparison.

What does Kinect mean for Rare's role in Microsoft Game Studios?
Obviously, MGS, when they bought Rare out, our remit and part of our job as a firstparty was to try and broaden the demographic for the Xbox 360. They certainly didn't need another developer to be creating another *Halo*. When we released on the Xbox 360 we had two launch titles: *Kameo*, which was broadening, we had *Perfect Dark*, and as time's gone on we've had *Nuts & Bolts*, *Viva Piñata*, the Avatars, and all of these are ways to broaden the demographic and give the Xbox a slightly softer face. And then we are doing something like Kinect that goes hand in hand with this and – I've said this before – it's as if the demographic, the market, the timing, the hardware and the software are all converging at the same time now whereas before we were trying to sell, say, gardening simulators to people who wanted to run around and kill everybody. It's quite a tough sell, like meat at a vegetarian convention…

How important do you think it is for Kinect to be providing revolutionary gaming experiences?
I think people find it very difficult to change and to accept change, and I think if you're hitting them with something that's completely different and unfamiliar then potentially you can scare the audience off. I think some of the core gamers might look at the launch titles and think they're derivative in terms of the content, [but] they're not when you actually play them. You realise there is a fantastic experience here that isn't possible anywhere else. And then when you go through second and third tier titles down the line you can start experimenting a little bit more.



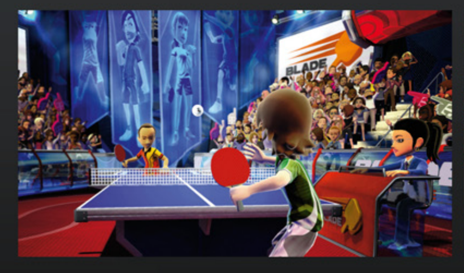
KINECT SPORTS

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **RARE** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

To best Nintendo's Wii, you must first best *Wii Sports*. And you can't say that Rare's latest doesn't have balls. Bowling first, then. Aiming with your body is simple and the effects of afterswing are noticeable – a few throws and you've got the rhythm down, and those gutterballs are no more. It's soon Turkey time, and there could be no greater evidence of responsiveness.

Hurdling's up next, an on-the-spot jog punctuated by knees-up jumping. Again it's a matter of getting used to the timing – our first attempt saw many a hurdle toppled, while the second was a clean run. For what it is, it's great – though tiring. Also in the pack we find Soccer, Ping Pong, Volleyball and Boxing, but we've yet to give these options a workout.

Topping the charm and impact of *Wii Sports* is mission impossible, but *Kinect Sports*' more full-bodied, energetic take on motion sports means it's an alternative, not an equivalent. Don't knock it until you've tried it.





An audience with...

Ian Livingstone

From Fighting Fantasy to Human Revolution, the life president of Eidos talks about a life spent in gaming

The details of **Ian Livingstone**'s career are so familiar – before entering the videogame industry he founded Games Workshop alongside flatmates John Peake and Steve Jackson in 1975, and went on to create the Fighting Fantasy series with Jackson in 1981 – that it's easy to take for granted what they imply: a man with a restless passion for games in all their forms. Following Square Enix's takeover of Eidos last year, the Japanese firm awarded him the title of life president of the label.

In June, Livingstone hosted the third annual GameHorizon conference at The Sage, Gateshead. At an event dominated by speculation as to what the future will be for the increasingly online, socially networked and free-to-play game industry, Livingstone opened the conference by asking delegates to consider whether "the power of the ivory tower designer" was under threat. He also found the time to organise a charity poker tournament during the event (lasting until the final table), and to sit down with us to discuss his career, the changing fortunes of the UK game industry, and the future of the Eidos label.

What's your reaction to the coalition government's decision not to offer tax relief to the UK game industry?
I think it's a great shame that the plan for tax breaks has been scrapped. Clearly we presented over the years a very robust argument in favour of tax breaks, explaining what happened in Canada, how it became number three in world development, achieving in ten years what took the UK industry 25 years and indeed pushing the UK into fourth, maybe even fifth, place in world development. There are strong arguments in terms of employment, in terms of the contribution to the UK GDP, in the fact that the treasury will be a net loser as more production will be done overseas and more people will move overseas in search of work.

Maybe the coalition saw tax breaks as something akin to a handout to an industry in trouble. And of course, it isn't in trouble: there just isn't an even playing field internationally. Developers are competing with 37.5 per cent tax breaks in Canada, 20 per cent in France, and naturally cheap labour markets in Asia and the Far East.

> "We need to tell kids, through their parents and teachers, that, hey, if you study maths you can make the next Grand Theft Auto"

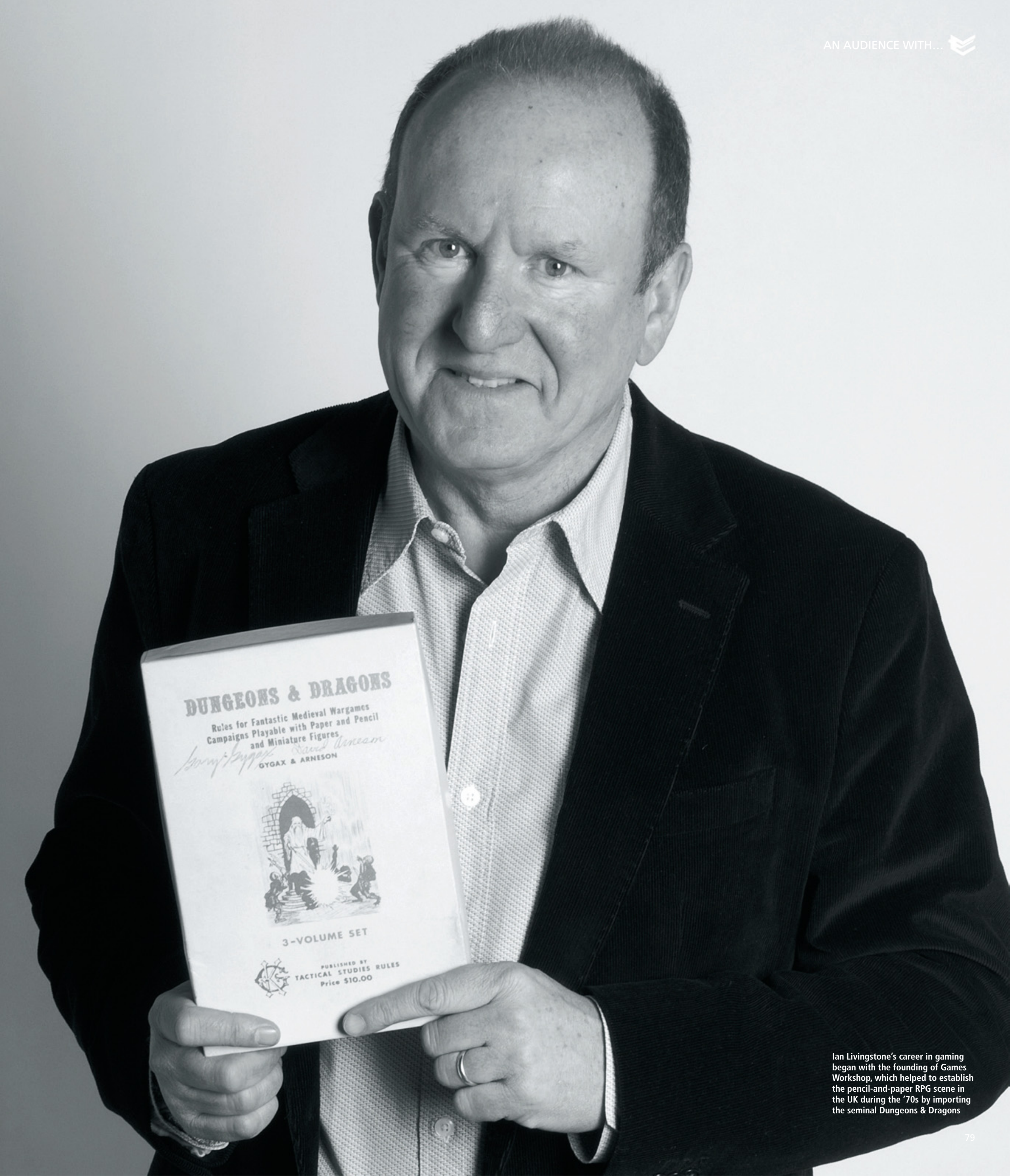
Do you think the videogame industry made its case strongly enough?
I think it was easy to say no to a tax break – it resonates with the voters as being tough on everybody. But I think [the industry] needs to present the argument in a different way, present it as the market being worth $50bn today and $90bn by 2015, and argue that this surely is an industry Britain not only excels at but which the government should want to invest in. It's not unreasonable to say we're a world leader in game creation – but we need to be able to exploit that by investment in startups and small companies. So instead of calling it a tax break, call it an investment fund. There's no point having relief which taxes you at a lesser rate after the event. People need the money up front to invest in their ideas.

What else should the government do?
Skills are clearly a big issue. I'm chair of the Computer Games Skills Council on behalf of Skillset. They mapped out all the universities offering computer games studies as a course. A lot of them were basically media studies courses with the words 'media studies' crossed out and the words 'computer games' in their place – they were tending to teach the philosophy of games rather than the hard skills necessary to make them. You can see why it happens, because they're funded on a bums-on-seats basis, and if they dumb down their courses – ie, take the maths out – they appeal to generalists or those looking for an easy ride as students.

We need to get maths into the curriculum and more importantly give people a reason to want to study maths – maybe university is too late. We need to tell kids, through their parents and teachers, that, hey, if you study maths you can make the next *Grand Theft Auto*, or the next *Farmville*, or the next *Tomb Raider*, and give some relevance and context for maths. Perhaps introduce game-based learning. We've seen the success of introducing *Brain Training* lessons in Scotland where the average maths age went up by ten per cent.

Let's turn to pencil-and-paper gaming for a moment. What's your response to the cease-and-desist letters sent out by Games Workshop to certain fansites in late 2009?
Well, I no longer have any commercial say or any equity in GW. All I can say is that I personally would not want to interfere with any fansites. I see it as a great thing that fans want to talk about your work, add value to it and spread the word. I don't see any plus sides in trying to shut down the people who make you what you are.

Do you think that the legacy of gamebooks like those in the Fighting Fantasy series can be seen videogames today?
It's funny because these days I often meet people who are now in their 30s who grew up on the Fighting Fantasy gamebooks during the '80s. Some of them are in the game industry



Ian Livingstone's career in gaming began with the founding of Games Workshop, which helped to establish the pencil-and-paper RPG scene in the UK during the '70s by importing the seminal Dungeons & Dragons



Eidos' most recognisable asset, Lara Croft, will soon return in *The Guardian Of Light* via XBLA and PSN on console and Steam on PC

now partly because they used to play Fighting Fantasy games. Clearly Fighting Fantasy was an interactive game experience pre-technology, and with the advent of technology you could take that experience and turn it into a videogame. So I certainly think we had an input, for sure.

Some people see games like *Heavy Rain* as a continuation of that legacy – would you agree with that observation?
I wouldn't want to claim to have any direct influence on *Heavy Rain* but I certainly see the roots of roleplaying in many games. Fighting Fantasy spawned a lot of the adventure games which emerged on PC, and you can certainly see the lineage of those games in something like *Heavy Rain*.

In terms of Eidos, how has the Square Enix deal changed your day-to-day job?
It's changed in some ways and in other ways not at all. They've given me this title of life president of Eidos, and what I do, which is what I've always done, is sit on our greenlight committee – approving or not approving titles for development. I also go round our studios and talk to our creatives and try to add some value to what they're trying to do – to try and give them the benefit of my wisdom, if you like [laughs]. My mantra has always been 'keep it simple'. Developers tend to naturally want to impress their development friends rather than make games for the consumer. So from that point of view I'm still involved in the creative process, helping to determine what franchises we're going to resurrect, and what new franchises we're going to introduce.

I fly the flag wherever I go. It's great to be part of a global content creation and publishing company. It's pretty significant, because a company like Eidos wouldn't have been able to survive independently in the world of escalating production costs without significant additional capital.

There's quite a big cultural gap between Eidos' traditional output and typical Square Enix games. Does Square Enix want to keep this diversity or does it try to encourage collaboration?
Square Enix are a global developer and publisher and they acquired Eidos for its IP and its talent. It's not their intention to take Eidos IP to Japan and develop it there. On the contrary, they're looking to invest in the development talent in the west and our IP. That's not to say we're not going to work collaboratively on some projects, or that some IPs may not lend themselves more fully to cooperation. Nothing's been determined yet, but who knows what opportunities may arrive in the future?

> "My mantra has always been 'keep it simple'. Developers want to impress their development friends rather than make games for consumers"

We noticed that you're listed as a contributor on *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*. What exactly was your role in that project?
Tomb Raider: Anniversary? That probably had more to do with my contribution to the original *Tomb Raider* [laughs]. Though it is fair to say I've spent my time at Eidos trying to guide Lara Croft through her life like an anguished father.

What did it take to get *Deus Ex* back into production?
It took the setting up of Eidos Montreal to get *Deus Ex* back into production [laughs]. It's one of the games I was involved in right at the start with Ion Storm. I've known Warren Spector from the old pencil-and-paper roleplaying days. I really loved his roleplaying games, and had fond memories of Ion Storm's creation, and his creating of *Deus Ex* – it got critical acclaim, and quite right too. It was always in the back of my mind that we had to bring it back at some point. The opportunity arose when Eidos Montreal was started. They were really keen to do it and were given the green light to go ahead.

Were there any doubts within the company about bringing it back?
As a new team they had to deliver on a legacy product – something Warren Spector had done so brilliantly. So there was an awful lot of pre-production before everyone was happy for it go ahead, but I'm pleased to say that it's looking absolutely amazing.

A few years ago you said that your favourite game was *Championship Manager* – is that still the case today?
I used to play *Championship Manager* all the time, though at the moment I play all kinds of games. I play on my iPod Touch, I play Facebook games – I farmed for quite some time, just to get an understanding of the plough, sow, reap mechanism, to understand what motivates so many people to play the game. That was quite interesting. I've played *Modern Warfare 2*, but being as decrepit and old as I am, twitch games don't really suit me these days.

Did *Farmville* get its hooks into you?
I did care for quite a long time. I played it for about three months. You do feel that compelling need to go back and make sure your watermelons haven't gone to mush. It was good fun to see your farm grow. I didn't spend any money but I can see why people would. It's alien to older people, why people would spend real money for virtual goods, but viewed in terms of buying an entertainment experience it makes sense.

***Farmville*, social networking and casual games were big themes of the GameHorizon conference; do you think the role of the traditional designer is under threat as constantly monitored and updated designs rise to prominence?**
I think a lot of people are claiming that the primacy of the traditional designer is under threat due to the demands of the crowd, and that more titles are going to be released when they're only 30 per cent content complete and that developers will look at the data and see what consumers like and don't like. Some people might cry, "Oh, that's terrible – that's taking the artistic control of the designer", but is that really a problem for a social game?

Deus Ex: Human Revolution is being handled by Eidos Montreal. The game had a strong showing at E3, and is due on 360, PC and PS3 in early 2011

If it's trying to be a crowd pleaser and the crowd wants a certain feature then why not give it to them?

Where do you think the most interesting products are coming from in the game industry today – big companies or the smaller independents?
I think consumers are forcing the change; the independents are excited to be able to connect to their consumers directly without anyone standing in the way of their ability to entertain their audience. This is great, of course, but what a lot of them don't understand is that this is a very crowded market. If you look at Facebook, there's tens of thousands of games. Look at the App Store – hundreds of thousands. These games need to be branded or they need heavy marketing dollars. Even though Zynga's got a captive audience they can advertise to for a new game like *Frontierville*, they're still spending millions of dollars advertising on Facebook, alerting people that a new game is being launched. So even though people may think, 'Oh, I can do a *Farmville*, launch it tomorrow, have it spread virally', that's not going to happen. If you've just created the best game ever made, you still need to tell people about it.

Do you think the market is sustainable?
It's not sustainable at all. This happens with every entertainment industry. It happened with games in the early days when they were put out on tape. A developer or publisher could publish loads of titles so there was this mushroom growth – and the only way you could compete, if not by increasing marketing dollars, was by increasing production costs. As games became more and more expensive the risks were greater, and unless you had access to capital you weren't going to get the visibility you needed, and that's exactly what's happening now.

In the past you've talked of your board game tournaments with Steve Jackson, Peter Molyneux and Clive Robert, in which you compete for a yearly prize called the Pagoda Cup – who's won it the most?
I have, by quite a lot, and I'm winning this year. At the moment we're playing games like Caylus, Agricola and Alhambra.

What do board games offer you that videogames don't?
For me, games have always been about socialising with like-minded people: to have a laugh, to interact, to stab them in the back and laugh at their expense. It's a great way of providing live-action banter. Now videogames have become more social and multiplayer I think the opportunity to enjoy them that way is happening more and more. I think an experience is always better when it's shared, whether it's having a meal, going to the cinema, looking at a sunset somewhere. With games, it's the same. It's just better to do things with other people.



PLAY IT STRA

AFTER THREE DECADES OF HETEROSEXUAL HEROES AND HEROINES, IS THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY FINALLY READY TO MAKE A 'GAY' VIDEOGAME?

Over the years, developers have asked a great deal of our imaginations. We've had to project into the shoes of an Italian plumber, identify with the plight of a pill-hungry yellow blob, be men and women of all ethnic backgrounds, children, animals, criminals, lunatics, invalids, gods, aliens. But there's one thing we've never been asked to do: play as a homosexual character.

While the TV and film industries finally appear comfortable with presenting gay characters without falling back on broad-stroke stereotypes, gamers have traditionally had to settle for worlds that, with a few notable exceptions, are heterosexual totalities.



Homosexuals, if they ever appear, are cackling villains or puerile figures of fun on the sidelines.

Whether it be *Zelda*'s fairy-chasing weirdo Tingle, *Fear Effect*'s titillating lipstick lesbians or *Cho Aniki*'s absurd juvenilia, gay as a concept has always struggled for credible visibility in games. We've certainly moved on from the days when Sega and Nintendo nervously took the scissors to gay content on their platforms (amputating *Streets Of Rage 3*'s Village People cast-off, boss character Ash, and removing reference to Birdo's confused gender identity from the *Super Mario Bros 2* manual, respectively).

However, homosexuality still maintains a very low profile in today's games. There are exceptions, such as *GTA*'s Gay Tony, *BioShock*'s Sander Cohen, *Metal Gear Solid*'s Vamp and *Fable II*'s Reaver. Beyond those, though, you'll need a good memory and a strong eye for detail. Anyone remember Tommy, Carla's gay neighbour in Quantic Dream's *Fahrenheit*? How about Makoto, the frustrated schoolboy who had a crush on the hero of From Software's 2005 RPG *Enchanted Arms*? BioWare's *Dragon Age* and *Jade Empire* titles, Sega's *Persona* series, *The Sims* franchise and a handful of others have a range of inclusive character customisation options to cater for same-sex relationships, but is that enough? In an age when developers are treating us to richer, more ambitious narratives than ever before, this fantasy representation of societies with homogeneously sexual beings feels out of touch.

Chris Shroyer is a game designer at Florida-based developer n-Space, and has worked on the likes of *Geist* (GameCube) and the DS version of *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*. Shroyer, gay himself, thinks the reason we see so few gay characters is not because of homophobia, but because of a fear of offending. "I think that developers are worried about 'getting it right' more than anything else," he says. "I don't think there are many on the development side that are opposed to including LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender]-related content, but I think there is a fear of offending publishers and consumers.

"Even though developers are not looking at a single character as representative of a highly diverse culture, they can be read that way by players as there are so few 'out' LGBT characters." And in-game homosexuality is so unusual that, when it does occur, it's especially noticeable. "For many LGBT players, these characters will face more scrutiny than any other. This can be an intimidating responsibility for developers, no matter if they're gay or straight themselves."

IGHT



CASE STUDY: SANDER COHEN

BIOSHOCK CREATOR KEN LEVINE PULLS APART RAPTURE'S SEXUALLY CONFLICTED RESIDENT PLAYWRIGHT

What was your initial vision for the Cohen character like?
Originally my vision for him was to be like Noel Coward, but just gone completely wrong. We wanted to get the whole Algonquin Round Table feel – all these artists, writers and poets in New York in the '30s and '40s would meet in the Algonquin Hotel and sit around and talk about art and have this very vibrant community. In my head, in Rapture you had Sander Cohen, Anna Culpepper and all his disciples – I could imagine them sitting around and having those kinds of discussions.

Why did you make him a gay character?
We didn't start from the perspective that we were going to have a representation of homosexuality in *BioShock* and this was going to be that character. He just sort of evolved. His sexuality – or more importantly, his repression of it, what it did to him and how it came out through in his art in very disturbing ways – became more apparent.

Were you worried by how he might be received by gamers?
Irrelevant of whether he's a good artist, or gay or straight, he's crazy. He's a killer. We didn't spend a lot of time worrying about how people might perceive his sexuality. There was much more concern with the Little Sisters, and how we did the harvesting. What was way more interesting to me was the internal conflict he had and his lack of acceptance of himself. The distance Cohen had between who he actually was and who he thought he was, whether it's his sexuality or his actual artistic ability, is huge.



Former Ion Storm dev Harvey Smith introduced a gay NPC to *Deus Ex: Invisible War*


Raphael Colantonio, creative director at Arkane Studios


"From my experience, 'gamer culture' is not inherently the most LGBT-friendly place" reckons Chris Shroyer at Florida-based dev n-Space


Caroline Miller, director of PR agency Indigo Pearl


Ken Levine, creative director at *BioShock* studio Irrational

In 2003, the development team behind *Deus Ex: Invisible War* met the challenge head on in a sequence where your male character had to flirt with a gay NPC in order to trick him into giving you a keycard. It was a sincere, if slightly awkward, attempt at including a believable gay character in a game – and one that was met with a degree of criticism from gay and straight gamers alike.

"Games have to be careful about how they handle characters, since most game characters are caricatures," explains *Invisible War*'s director, **Harvey Smith**. "Given the pace of most action games, you don't have time to fully develop a nuanced character, so even if your goals are progressive, you might end up coming across as if you're mocking the situation. Any type of character can come across as clumsy or satirical if you're not careful."

Raphael Colantonio, creative director at Arkane Studios, who is currently working on an unannounced project with Smith, continues: "Personally, I prefer when the system is totally neutral, lacking any moral judgements on how I recombine things. For instance, in *Ultima VII*, the player could have a male or female avatar and could visit male or female prostitutes. This is about designing a system and allowing the player to explore and express."

"Similarly," says Smith, "*The Sims* is a great example of just setting up the variables and allowing the player to toy with them and project on to the situation. Ideally, this will eventually be a non-issue… normalised like some less-charged aspects of character. The early efforts, even if clumsy, advance us toward that goal, hopefully."

Almost every major game publisher refused to provide a perspective for this article, which seems to prove that there's an industry-wide fear of saying, or doing, the wrong thing. As Smith says, games have limited elbow-room in which to develop realistic characters and nuanced narrative in between gameplay, so why risk a half-baked gay character just for the sake of it? The flak Capcom received following the *Resident Evil 5* race row well illustrates what awaits developers that ham-fistedly wade into emotive territory, whether personal or historical. Such dramas will only encourage others to play it safe.

"Most games that include 'heterosexual content' – AKA straight characters – aren't really 'about' heterosexuality, and most aren't even 'about' romance, sexuality, relationships, marriage, etc," says **Jeb Havens**, a game designer who works at California-based developer Slide creating social games. Havens is the founder of an LGBT roundtable that's been held at GDC for the past six years. "Until more games are made that address these issues successfully, [then] to switch some gender pronouns and 'throw in' a LGBT character could easily come off as being 'tacked on' or 'token'. It's a bit of a Catch-22, but until there are more games with LGBT characters then it's hard to include one and treat it just as casually as a straight character's heterosexuality. Since most publishers and developers try to eliminate unnecessary risks, it's hard to argue that a 'casually tacked on' LGBT character is a risk worth taking."

It's clearly an important topic for many, and one that's perhaps easy to

Maxis' *The Sims* series has gradually widened its range of customisation options aimed at gay and lesbian players to incorporate same-sex marriages



take too seriously. Surely a game is just a game and not a relevant forum for these sorts of discussions? After all, how absurdly incongruous would it have been if Master Chief came out of the closet halfway through *Halo 3*? Talk of irrelevance is certainly a persuasive argument when talking about, say, a platform game, but is it also simply a 'get out of jail free' card for nervous developers and publishers? Yes and no, reckons **David Eddison**, editor of Gaygamer.net.

"Developers have a duty to make great games, first and foremost, and a great game doesn't cause, exacerbate or prey upon social inequality," he insists. "That said, game development is a creative process and all artists have a duty to be true to their vision. If you're making a driving game, there needn't be a PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a US support and education group]- or NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]-themed car, but if you give your players only white male avatars, you're missing a huge opportunity and not doing a very good job of presenting yourself as a worldly, broad-minded artist. What artist wants to be thought of as narrow-minded? And that's before the question of sexuality, really. I was very excited to see a female protagonist of colour in *Left 4 Dead 2*. There is a lot of diversity yet to be explored in the gaming world; the LGBT corner just happens to be my speciality and my concern.



Fable has always permitted same-sex relationships; the third game will allow gay couples to adopt children too

"WRITE ONLY HETEROSEXUAL ROMANCES OR A GIRL-ON-GIRL 'ROMANCE' TO TITILLATE STRAIGHT MALE AUDIENCES, AND YOU MAKE YOURSELF LOOK BOORISH AND IMMATURE"

"On the other hand, if you're making a game about social communities, like *The Sims* for example, or a game in which romance plays a role as a gameplay element such as *Dragon Age* or *Mass Effect*, as opposed to a specific story about a specific romance, like *Alan Wake* or, well, *Super Mario Bros*, then writing only heterosexual romances is limiting. Write only heterosexual romances or a girl-on-girl 'romance' option that's pretty clearly designed to titillate a straight male audience, and you have certainly made yourself look boorish and immature – precisely the stereotype the gaming industry works so hard to overcome."

Eddison's *Mass Effect* citation is a fine example of a publisher going about this the wrong way. In *Mass Effect*, if you chose a female character you can famously indulge in a relationship with another woman at one point. Choose to play as a male, however, and the game remains staunchly heterosexual. It's a design decision that's difficult to justify.

"The 'game is just a game' argument is a tautology as well as a straw man, and it proffers a false dichotomy between entertainment media and artistic media," Eddison continues. "They are one and the same. Being 'just a game' does not recuse games from the same kind of self-accountability that any other form of art, entertainment or consumable product must address."

From Software's inventive 2005 RPG *Enchanted Arms* boasted a central gay character, the flamboyant Makoto (top right), whose love goes unrequited

That point about consumable products, however, is key: a publisher's primary concern is that their game might sell fewer copies if it features potentially alienating content. Like it or not, many games are still made and marketed with a straight male audience in mind. Infinity Ward's regrettable FAGS viral marketing video last year, which ended with the message, "Brought to you by Fight Against Grenade Spam," shows who many developers and publishers believe they're selling their games to: teenage boys all too happy to throw homophobic slurs, sincere or otherwise, around Xbox Live. In the same reality that sees publishers push out bankable sequels year in, year out rather than try their hand at new IP, few would see the point in risking alienating their perceived core audience to be more socially inclusive. It doesn't help that there's no incentive for them to do so, either.



BioWare fielded controversy last year after its decision to remove same-sex relationships from *Mass Effect 2*

"I don't think they have a duty to represent all sexual orientations any more than a moviemaker has to represent all sexual orientations in a movie," says Havens. "The movie industry, as a whole, has some duty to be representative and tell a variety of stories, and there are systems set up to try and make that happen. But no individual movie director or producer should make their movie based on some moral obligation to represent society. Moviemakers that include diversity in their movie do so, in part, because it makes for a more interesting movie, and because it appeals to a wider audience. That industry has matured to the point where people understand and can measure why the inclusion of diversity can be a good business decision. That is partly due to the groups and systems in place to promote diversity.

"For example, as a filmmaker, I know that if I include LGBT themes in my movie, then I can enter it in LGBT-themed film festivals and get access to LGBT press, and market my movie to a more targeted audience. The videogames industry is missing many of those pieces. We don't have many industry-wide incentives to encourage diversity, and we don't have the evidence to make a strong business case for including diversity."

It's hard to put the theory that 'gay games wouldn't sell' to the test. Rockstar's *GTAIV* expansion *The Ballad Of Gay Tony* potentially provides an interesting yardstick, but while critically it was received with enthusiasm, as it's DLC there's no



CASE STUDY: BRUTE SPLICER

2K MARIN'S CREATIVE DIRECTOR, JORDAN THOMAS, PULLS BIOSHOCK 2'S SOCIOPATHIC HOMOPHOBES OUT OF THE CLOSET

The Brute splicer seems aggressively homophobic. What was behind that?
All splicers embody a kind of duality. There's the monstrous aspect which helps to justify the player's consistently homicidal behaviour against them, and there's the tragic, human side which frequently you have to listen more closely to pick up on. The backstory of the Brute splicer is that he's extremely confused about his own sexuality and has elected to mask it with violent bravado – splicing up stronger and stronger to appear more traditionally masculine. In *BioShock*, one tool we have as writers is that of exaggeration. This kind of 'she doth protest too much' macho posturing takes place in the real world all the time. It is often that which we hate in ourselves that we demonise in others. However, if you use the Hypnotize Plasmid on a Brute, or sneak around and listen to his idles, there's a very timid, lonely side of him that latches on to the player as a kind of target for his affections. It reveals he's very clearly closeted and desperately wants to connect under all that rage. Without the associated shame, born of that time period and his East End upbringing, he'd probably never have become a splicer at all.

Was he influenced by any particular real-life person?
Not one specific person, but you see it all the time – the moralistic politician or church figure leading a crusade against depravity of X type, and six months later it's revealed that they kept a stable of sex workers or were horrifically abusive to their own families. In fiction, Danny [another writer on *BioShock 2*] and I were thinking of two characters from The Sopranos, one of whom tries to flee his sexuality due to his surroundings, and another who clearly takes far too great physical pleasure in tormenting him.

Were any concerns voiced about the language that the Brute splicer uses?
For us, at least, writing splicers wasn't about a specific orientation, past crime, or addiction at all. It's about how they respond to shame and loss. In the case of the Toasty splicer, he's clearly a sexual predator and irredeemable misogynist – but he was also once a person, who seemingly fell into splicing to feel more desirable. These aren't characters anyone's meant to emulate – you murder them by the truckload. I think we knew some of the Brute's language was controversial, but the team was able to see the full script for each splicer – and we were pretty confident that, as a villain, his psychology was nuanced rather than caricatured. His behaviour is absolutely horrific, but life often is. We felt that in the context of all that the Brute had to say, it had been earned, rather than trivially tacked on because someone liked the sound of nasty words.

way of telling how it sold in comparison to the less provocatively titled *The Lost And Damned*. Rockstar wouldn't volunteer sales figures.

So, we put the hypothetical question of whether a 'gay' game could succeed at retail to a number of leading game marketing specialists. The response was mixed. "It's absolutely something that we should do, and personally I'd love to take it on," enthuses **Caroline Miller**, director of PR agency Indigo Pearl, which has masterminded marketing campaigns for titles as diverse as *GTAIII*, the *Tekken* series and *Dancing On Ice*. "It depends, though. Is it for 'core gamers', or is it for 'casuals' – girls and mums? For core gamers, it would be more difficult. That's not to say that the gaming media wouldn't love it, but will that sell the game? A huge proportion of consumers get their gaming news from the likes of Nuts and Zoo, and it's difficult to see those outlets embracing it."

Tim Ponting, former European PR director for Activision and director of Renegade PR, behind campaigns for *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*, is a little more positive. "The game would have to overcome the same challenges as any new IP. Does it offer players an aspirational experience with a strong central character? If Altaïr in *Assassin's Creed* had been a court jester then I doubt Ubisoft would have had a hit on their hands. The homosexuality of a protagonist cannot get in the way of an exciting, aspirational, heroic



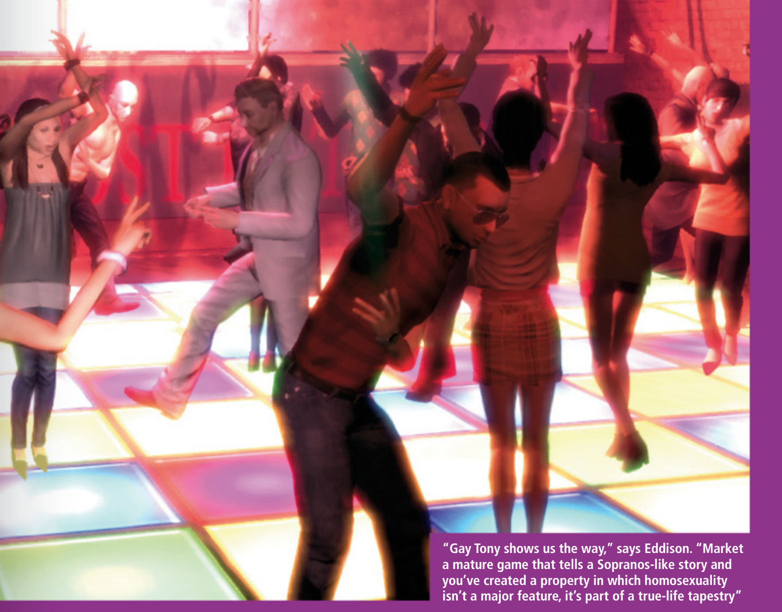
gaming experience. If you like, you can think of it in the same terms as a mainstream action movie. I think, in this day and age, no one would bat an eyelid at a gay central character. But if it was a movie about flower sellers, it wouldn't have the same appeal to the action movie audience as a story of international espionage. Similarly, the gameplay would need to be familiar but fresh – the homosexuality of characters in a game is unlikely to have much of an effect here."

"THINK OF IT IN THE SAME TERMS AS A MAINSTREAM ACTION MOVIE. I THINK, IN THIS DAY AND AGE, NO ONE WOULD BAT AN EYELID AT A GAY CENTRAL CHARACTER"

Of course, the annals of gaming history are littered with examples of notionally strong IPs that under-performed at retail – *Okami*, *Mirror's Edge*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Jet Set Radio* and *Brütal Legend* to name but



In the '80s and '90s, Sega and Nintendo removed homosexual content from games for release overseas. Westerners never got to meet *Streets of Rage 3*'s Ash



"Gay Tony shows us the way," says Eddison. "Market a mature game that tells a Sopranos-like story and you've created a property in which homosexuality isn't a major feature, it's part of a true-life tapestry"

a few. A new IP with a gay hook would surely face plenty more stumbling blocks on its way to profit besides just successfully telling an engaging story.

"It all depends on how it's messaged in PR, and how it's positioned in marketing," Ponting responds. "The beard-stroking game aesthetes may find it fascinating, laudable and relevant that the plot addresses a character's sexuality, but if the ad in Loaded magazine positions the game as 'The First Ever Gay Firstperson Shooter!' it's not going to work. However, I would absolutely expect that no matter how well you positioned the title, there would still be a massive backlash from the same gamers who lurk on multiplayer servers peddling racist, homophobic, ignorant invective to all and sundry."

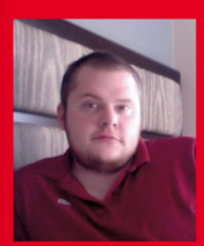
Even if it's established that there is a receptive audience out there, successfully marketing such a potentially controversial title would be a challenge. "I'd market it the same way as any game – with a robust plan," Ponting argues. "Look at the game, find the key elements that will appeal to the opinion formers and PR the hell out of them. Work out how to position the game in a mainstream market. What other titles should it be aligned with? How can we maximise the association with successful competitors while up-selling its unique and new features? If you approach a game like this from the point of view that the homosexuality of the lead character is your strongest marketing hook, then I'd suggest the game is probably not worth publishing in the first place. I think it's naïve in the extreme to think that gamers who happen to be gay will buy a game because it features a gay character. Gay gamers play *Call Of Duty* because it's a great firstperson shooter, not because they like the cut of Captain Price's handlebar moustache."

While nobody wants to see gay characters shoehorned into games purely in the name of political correctness, a more realistic social fabric in the games we play can only benefit an industry still moving into the mainstream. Although a 'gay' game might still be a long way off, it seems that the industry is slowly wandering down a more progressive path. You might not have played as a gay character in *The Ballad Of Gay Tony*, but the fact that Rockstar was willing to slap the word 'gay' on its game in big, bold letters is a clear sign that some publishers are willing to loosen up and take risks. Elsewhere, Peter Molyneux recently announced that same-sex couples in *Fable III* will be able to adopt children, Microsoft has reached out to the GLAAD [Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation] in an effort to combat offensive behaviour on Xbox Live, and attendance of Havens' GDC roundtable has increased every year.

"As the industry evolves and matures, and our systems of developing, marketing and recognising games evolve, then the games will evolve too," says Havens. "The risks will be taken at the edges first, not with the big publishers and next-gen consoles. Fortunately, the games industry is getting more and more 'edges' in the form of casual gaming, mobile gaming, social gaming, indie development and alternative business models."



Jeb Havens designs social games for California developer Slide. He began an LGBT roundtable at GDC six years ago



David Eddison is the co-editor of Gaygamer.net, founded as a community for LGBT gamers. "The hostility of the rest of the gaming world toward LGBT gamers is the reason we exist"



Tim Ponting, ex-Activision PR, now director of Renegade PR



Jordan Thomas, creative director at 2K Marin



Mark Llabres Hill, writer on *Fable II* at Lionhead Studios



CASE STUDY: REAVER

FABLE II'S WRITER, MARK LLABRES HILL, EXPLAINS HOW HE CONCEIVED ALBION'S HEDONISTIC BISEXUAL

Talk us through Reaver's creation
He was originally conceived to be a character with no morals, no scruples and no motivation other than revelling in his own self-importance. He's immortal thanks to a pact with dark, shadowy forces, the best shot in Albion, incomparably vain, and lots of fun.

You decided to make him bisexual…
Reaver's sexuality is just a natural result of his character. Since his driving principle is pleasure, it made sense that he wouldn't deprive himself of the company of anyone he found attractive. And when one is immortal, it's easy to get bored.

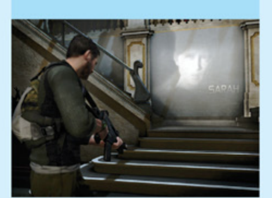
Is he inspired by any real-life characters?
Although not based on any real-life people, in the early days he came across as a strange combination of the Marquis de Sade, Errol Flynn and Caligula. His contempt for life, his laziness, his constant pursuit of pleasure in whatever form he could find it, and the fact that he could bridge the gap between *Fable*'s more serious side and its silliest, made him a fun character to write from day one. He soon developed into our personal favourite as we fleshed out his dialogue style and background. If you buy his mansion in *Fable II*, you can find a series of narrated pages that give clues as to his history, from tragic beginnings to wild adventures on the high seas and latter-day orgies.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Splinter Cell: Conviction



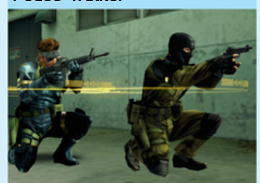
Stealth isn't all skulking in the shadows, it's leaping out, breaking a man's neck and headshotting his friends before they see you. Then skulking in the shadows.
UBISOFT, 360, PC

Super Mario Galaxy 2



Galaxy 2's generosity may know no limits, but nor does the game know mercy. Grab all 120 stars and the game dares you to do it all over again, but harder this time.
NINTENDO, WII

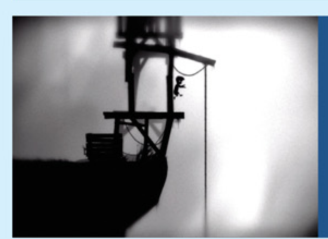
Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker



Eating? Noon is all about lunch ops for us, co-ordinating four Snakes and tempting tank commanders to stick their heads out. A brilliant mechanic in a brilliant game.
KONAMI, PSP

Plane sailing

The triumphant rebirth of 2D gaming



Rather than a limitation, *Limbo*'s 2D graphics give it the appearance of concept art in motion – few games can claim to look as close to their target trailer as this one. The absence of a third dimension doesn't stop its puzzles from being suitably mind-twisting, either

Being an older gamer may sometimes mean miserable-looking online kill ratios, but you can always take solace in the fact that young Turks will never understand what it was like when 3D gaming happened. Not stereoscopic 3D, but 3D worlds in games. Who can forget walking up to Peach's castle for the first time in *Super Mario 64*? It wasn't just exciting, it was mindblowing.

As the 16bit generation ended, 2D platformers – even the most innovative examples, such as *Yoshi's Island* – seemed like little more than variations on a theme, and at the time it seemed obvious that 3D was the future. Yet here were are, 15 years later, and it's like 2D gaming never went away. And it's not just handheld and indie productions keeping the flame alive: some of the most experimental and mind-bending levels of *Super Mario Galaxy 2* take place from a side-on view.

New platforms and the economics of game-making positively encourage 2D gaming. You have designers like Randy Smith leaving EA to make *Spider: The Secret Of Bryce Manor* as part of a small team. He wasn't the first to give up big-bucks modern-day game development for a more back-to-basics approach, and he won't be the last.

From a creative standpoint, the appeal of working in 2D isn't difficult to identify. As *Limbo*'s creative director Arnt Jensen explained during our visit to the studio in **E**215, working in two dimensions has meant that nothing – no 3D modellers or texture artists – stood between his concept art and the finished game.

To talk about 3D stagnation, or something like it, would obviously be nonsense. And today's designers of 2D games aren't necessarily more creative or original than those of previous years. But they're certainly more empowered. Thanks to new delivery mechanisms, 2D games from developers both big and small can get equal billing. Look at *Limbo*, from a Danish indie, for example, compared to the mighty Konami's *Castlevania*.

In £40 boxes next to 3D wonderlands, 2D games often struggled. Now that such strictures have been removed, developers and players are returning to the flatlands in great numbers, and mining some glittering treasures.





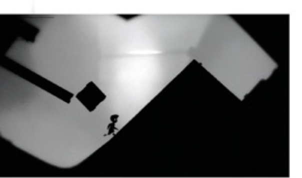


Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten

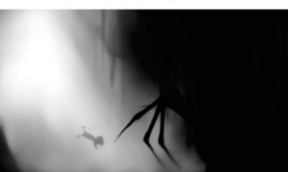


LIMBO

FORMAT: **360** RELEASE: **OUT NOW** PUBLISHER: **PLAYDEAD**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E215**





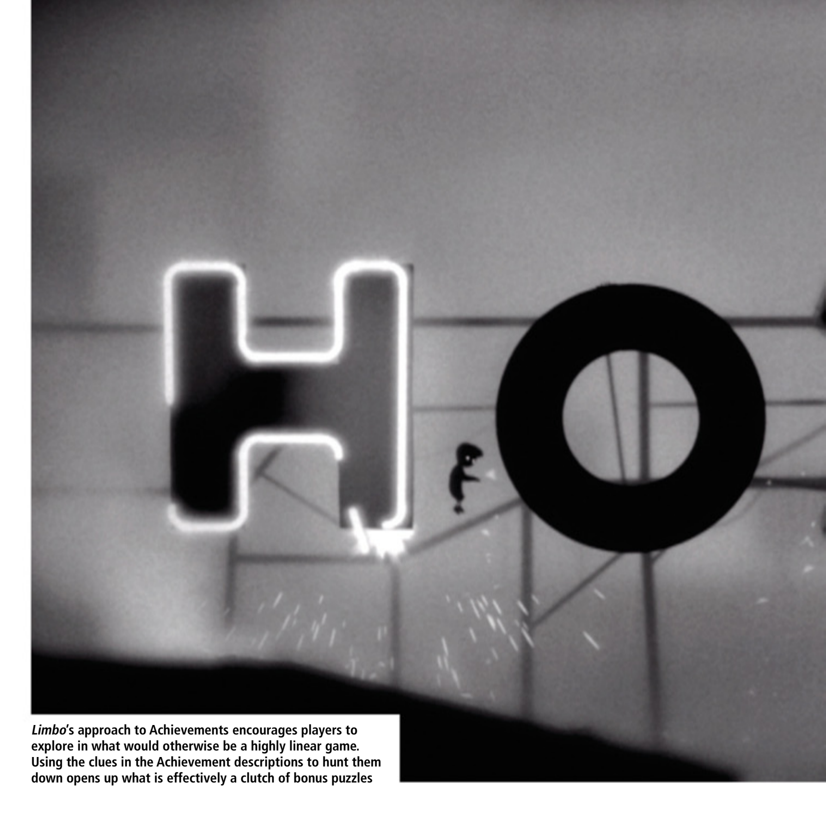


Despite the lack of detail – other than the light dimming in the boy's eyes – *Limbo*'s myriad death scenes can be quite shocking. A splash of blood and some flailing limbs goes a long way

Limbo's beautiful. That much should be apparent from the screenshots. It's also horrible. Not in the sense that it's poorly designed or a chore to play, but because of the wicked delight it takes in undercutting its beauty with moments of grisly violence. It's a puzzle game with a sense of humour, a sense of wonder, and an unhealthy fascination with the dismemberment of a prepubescent boy. It's one of the most tonally distinct titles available on Xbox Live, and one of the finest.

In a game of stark aesthetics, the forest which provides the backdrop for the game's opening third showcases *Limbo*'s visuals at their richest. The black silhouettes of the foreground give way to a backdrop of glowing, shifting mists dotted with burning white butterflies and the half-glimpsed outlines of ramshackle structures and trees. The drive to solve *Limbo*'s puzzles, press forward and explore this ethereal space is one which the game constantly rewards, simply because it's impossible to predict what could be waiting a screen's length away. A giant spider? A tribe of feral children? A magical rain machine? In isolation these things are fascinating curios; together they form a patchwork world stitched together from the pages of Gothic fairytales. The game's story might be minimalist, but the world in which it takes place runs deep with mystery. It's almost a disappointment when, as the game continues, the oppressive forests and noir-themed rooftop paths give way to clanking industrial settings which, while well realised and home to some of the more challenging puzzles, simply cannot compete with the atmosphere of the opening half.

Whereas fellow quirky puzzlers *Portal* and *Braid* build themselves around a central mechanic and then wring it dry, *Limbo*'s puzzles are unified not by a single device, but by the physical principles underpinning them. Weight, acceleration, inertia and friction – these things give authenticity to *Limbo*'s unreal world, and an intuitive logic base for players to work from when trying to solve it. While occasionally relying on the physics puzzle staples of crates, weights and switches, *Limbo* is packed with novel ideas of its own – and understands the effectiveness of a lighter touch. While other games will gently introduce a mechanic, test players' understanding and then – eventually – unleash the killer puzzle which demanded all that preparation, *Limbo*'s a more restless beast. It introduces mechanics as diverse as

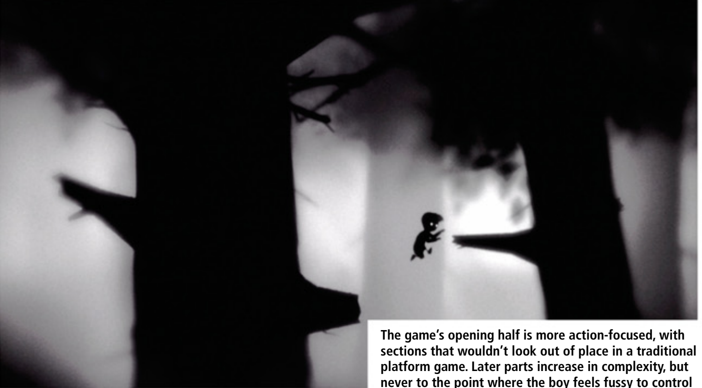


***Limbo*'s approach to Achievements encourages players to explore in what would otherwise be a highly linear game. Using the clues in the Achievement descriptions to hunt them down opens up what is effectively a clutch of bonus puzzles**



> The black silhouettes give way to a backdrop of glowing, shifting mists dotted with burning white butterflies and outlines of ramshackle structures





The game's opening half is more action-focused, with sections that wouldn't look out of place in a traditional platform game. Later parts increase in complexity, but never to the point where the boy feels fussy to control







While the game plays with scale throughout, nowhere is this more apparent than in the sections which see the boy swallowed up by the cogs and gears of some infernal machine



herding strange animals into equally strange machines, or manually adjusting the water level in a series of tanks, and then moves on to its next surprise. For many, this lack of repetition will be welcome, though some will no doubt find the relatively short playtime (around four hours) something of a disappointment. And while the game does build its final act around a pair of particularly high-concept ideas (one of which owes a debt of gratitude to *Super Mario Galaxy*), there are few puzzles here as challenging as the best that *Braid* has to offer.

The boy himself is impeccably animated, reacting to the knocks, bumps and drops of the world around him with a natural fluidity. Jump towards a ledge at the very extreme of his grasp and his arms reach out convincingly. Land the jump and he'll pull himself up with the clumsy enthusiasm of an Ico; miss it and he'll hit the floor with the crumpling thud of a discarded doll. This is one of the gentler death scenes the game has to offer, and there are many (*Limbo*'s favourite way of introducing a puzzle is to have some part of it kill you), yet these demises, for all their sickening variety, are never quite as hard to watch as they should be. In fact, they're rather funny.

If the secret to good humour is timing, then *Limbo*'s a stand-up comic. Have you heard the one about the falling mantrap which, deftly avoided, sends you running straight into the metal jaws of another? Or the one about the giant piston which doesn't behave entirely how you expect? Some delightful sound effects help (see 'The sound of silence'), with a range of squishing noises helping to blur the line between slapstick and macabre, and like the best performers, *Limbo*'s also a master of the art of misdirection, its most shocking traps and hazards almost always lurking in plain sight. What first appears (and much of the time is) a game of sombre, serious tones betrays itself as black-humoured jester, happily undercutting the eerie beauty of its monochrome netherworld with a spiked pit.

And when *Limbo*'s over, it's that world – and not the isolated puzzles, creatures, or moments of morbid comedy that made it – which lingers in the memory. Playdead's debut title is a rare thing – a wholly realised place as well as a successfully realised game, and both *Limbo* and the Limbo inside it are one-of-a-kind places to be stuck in. **[9]**







The story is never intrusive, and the game understands the effectiveness of conveying narrative through environmental detail. Dead bodies warn the player of nearby threats, and hint at sad tales of their own



The occasional run-ins with the fauna of Limbo provide some of the game's weirdest moments. Less strange, but scarier, are Limbo's human(?) inhabitants, older-looking boys who aggressively defend their territory

The sound of silence



Less obvious but just as good as *Limbo*'s aesthetic makeup is its audio design. While there is (almost) no music, background noises range from faint hisses to single discordant notes stretched to last far too long. Most of the time this ambient noise does little else than contribute towards *Limbo*'s tone, though late in the game it increases in prominence. Sound effects are also excellent: everyday noises such as the pitter-patter of the boy's feet, or the sound of wind whistling through trees, are given an eerie clarity without the presence of a conventional soundtrack to cover them.



DEATHSPANK

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA **DEVELOPER:** HOTHEAD GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E211







Recycling unwanted items into money to make extra space in your inventory is a necessary but overly laborious chore

A seemingly eternal night has fallen over the action-RPG genre as we wait for the arrival of *Diablo III*. The few games that have dared to tread here have shone in the darkness, however. The cheap and cheerful dungeon crawler *Torchlight* helped fill the hack'n'slash void, and *DeathSpank* looks to do the same. Except it also wields a not-so-secret weapon that might make other action-RPGs, even *Diablo III* itself, feel wanting. That weapon is Ron Gilbert, hallowed co-author of LucasArts adventure game funnies, who brings to *DeathSpank* its eponymous knuckleheaded hero and a bawdy world that is by turns knowing, puerile, silly and subversive. But mostly just silly.

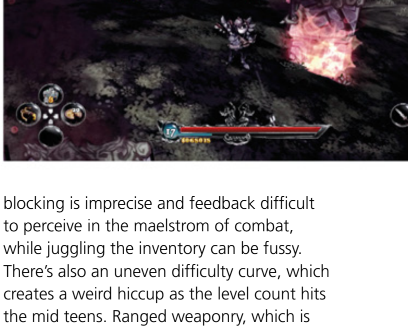
In terms of the Top Trumps of its hack'n'slash feature-set, it stacks up pretty well against its contemporaries, although it opts for a non-randomised world. The landscape is huge and, as DeathSpank navigates it, spools as though on a cylinder – an exaggerated curvature that gives the game the look of a pop-up book, complemented by its combination of bright, chunky 3D and 2D sprites. It encloses a good deal of variety, albeit mostly familiar – but its visitation of clichés like enchanted forests and demonic mines is always in the context of mocking the genre. And, except for a few wobbles, it keeps up a cracking pace, propelling the player to new areas full of new creatures to evaporate in large numbers with new and devastating particle effects. It is quite a feat, in fact, that the player's awesome power never undermines the sense of continual and significant advancement in the game.



Its visitation of clichés like enchanted forests and demonic mines is always in the context of mocking the genre



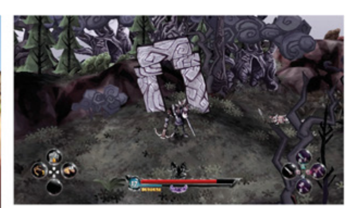
There's depth to the combat, too, with combos and modifiers that take your hacking and slashing to great and glorious heights. The 'justice meter' fills as you mince monsters – quicker still if you use a variety of attacks and blocks. When full, using one of your purple weapons unleashes a special and spectacular attack – frying enemies with chain lightning, turning you into a whirling dervish, or hammering foes into the ground. It's not without its foibles, however: blocking is imprecise and feedback difficult to perceive in the maelstrom of combat, while juggling the inventory can be fussy. There's also an uneven difficulty curve, which creates a weird hiccup as the level count hits the mid teens. Ranged weaponry, which is terrifically useful at the start, becomes all but meaningless. It may be the luck of loot drops, but we were at level 16 before we picked up our second crossbow, and even that was some eight levels weaker than our other weapons. Only once did we find ourselves consciously grinding levels, however, and even then briefly. And it's hardly a chore when *DeathSpank*'s piñata-party combat is so rudimentarily satisfying – there are few things more cathartic than returning to a troublesome area only to blast through its mobs of monsters to the cha-ching of loot as it flies into your coffers.



Intermingled with the critter-smashing action is some light adventure gameplay that gives Gilbert the opportunity to exercise his funny-man credentials, ploughing a family-friendly furrow of ribald Nickelodeon-level humour, with gurning caricatures and references to poo and chickens. But if the amusement here (indeed, throughout videogaming) still largely tends towards Spongebob rather than Chris Morris, there

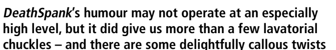


The main quest sees DeathSpank set out in pursuit of a mysterious artefact, only to have it snatched away from him by the henchmen of the dastardly Lord Von Prong. As you'd expect, the solution involves unicorn poo and the stuffing of orphans into a sack









DeathSpank's humour may not operate at an especially high level, but it did give us more than a few lavatorial chuckles – and there are some delightfully callous twists



DeathSpank himself is a boneheaded hero in the tradition of The Tick and Harvey Birdman. You get the sense that his voice actor is trying a little too hard to deliver lines in a 'wacky' manner, but you warm to him eventually





DeathSpank isn't stingy with spectacle: spells, such as Hell From Heaven and the Black Hole Orb, make short work of enemy hordes. Along the way you pick up runes which empower certain weapon combos

are moments when the game edges towards darker and more daring things.

By and large, Gilbert's influence manifests itself in the form of dialogue trees, which mostly exist for the joy of reading the various silly options available. But conversations do occasionally take on a more functional role: some diplomacy is needed if you are to reconcile an estranged couple, the objective being to steal their adopted orphan while they're amorously engaged. While most quests involve bashing a certain number of gonads or intestines from a particular species of monster, there are more involved pseudo-puzzles which nod to the non-sequiturs familiar to point'n'click fans. Approach certain objects in the world and you have the option of using them with an inventory item – put an anvil in a farmer's well, for instance, and he'll spend ages trying to pull it out, long enough for you to steal his cherries, which are required to dye some demonic horns. Drop a wheel near some termites and they'll gnaw the wooden rim off, so that the spokes can act as teeth when fitted into a sequence of cogs, thus allowing you to activate a nearby dam's drainage mechanism. These are, perhaps, even more obtuse solutions than they would be in a pure point'n'click: here it involves interaction entirely outside of *DeathSpank*'s normal lexicon of hitting things. But *DeathSpank* knows this. In fact, its obscurity is a send-up, and easily dispelled – crack a couple of the fortune cookies you pick up along the way and the solution to any of the game's quests is laid bare.

By turning these puzzles into a frippery, *DeathSpank* ultimately manages the segue between adventure game and hack'n'slash fluidly. But, by the same token, it also means that the potential depth that adventure game tropes could lend is curtailed. Nonetheless, the action is confidently produced and the humour distinctive, well-pitched and, mostly, sharply written. And, with this wit, it proves that there's much greater breadth to a genre that is so often seen to be in thrall of its leading franchise. Hothead Games may just have discovered that the best way to dispel *Diablo*'s shadow is to make light of it. **[8]**

The game's map is a clumsy thing – viewable as either a world map that's lacking in detail, or in several enlarged fragments. But it's difficult to get a sense of where everything is in one go. Luckily, there's a quick travel system between save points



All that glisters



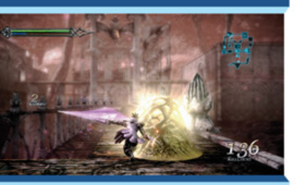
While there's no online co-op multiplayer, *DeathSpank* does allow a second player to pick up a pad and drop into the game as Sparkles the wizard. There's an interesting asymmetry to the action – the two players share a health bar, but Sparkles has his own separate set of powers to deploy – including exploding clones, fireballs and healing spells – each of which needs a lengthy recharge. Combat is still messy, but there is nuance to be had in coordination, and together you can take down more formidable foes. Watching DeathSpank shuffle through his inventory isn't terribly exciting for Sparkles, however.



NINETY-NINE NIGHTS 2

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: Q ENTERTAINMENT/FEELPLUS

Biological weapons



While most of your time playing *N3II* will be spent fighting an endless rush of foot soldiers, other enemy types do on occasion pop up. These large fleshy pods (above) appear alongside sets of smaller sacs which emit a toxic cloud – the large pod must be tracked down and killed in order to remove the clutch of smaller enemies. Boss encounters also end the majority of levels. While requiring little more to defeat than predictable pattern spotting, and often packing cheap attacks, they're also the few occasions for which you'll have to think tactically about how you fight.

If *Ninety-Nine Nights 2* proves anything, it's that just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. It's fine to boast of levels containing up to 'one million troops', but when every single one of those troops has the exact same character model, battle fatigue tends to set in fast. Whether or not *N3II* really can handle a million enemies onscreen at a time is academic – its flaws become evident around the 200 mark.

N3II is a genetically engineered, battery-farmed freak of the hack'n'slash genre. What was once the genre's primary attribute – the volume of troops the player has to wade through – has been pumped with steroids to the point of monstrosity, and it's simply too much weight for the enfeebled, buckling legs of the combat system to bear.

Selecting one from what eventually develops into a roster of five characters, players are tasked with cutting a grisly swathe across a series of repetitive levels. Perfunctory mission objectives ensure you kill things in every corner of the map, and are the primary motivation for exploring *N3II*'s architecturally limited dungeons and keeps (*N3II*'s palette is noticeably muted compared to the original's rolling plains). Fail a mission and you'll find the game to be stingy with checkpoints, forcing players to retread up to 45 minutes' worth of play after death.

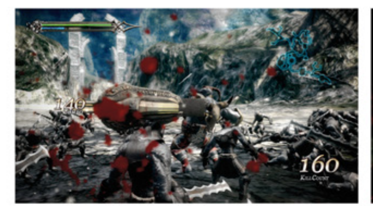
The hacking and slashing is serviceable, but simply doesn't retain interest beyond the first couple of hours. Heavy and medium attacks can be mixed into flashy looking combos, and a selection of 'active' and 'passive' abilities can be equipped and upgraded between missions, with the red orbs that spill from fallen foes acting as currency. Active abilities are magic attacks primarily useful for crowd control, whereas passive abilities confer status effects and damage bonuses. There's a certain satisfaction in starting a new mission able to slice and dice your way through packs of enemies at a faster rate than before, but it's a satisfaction born from a decrease in tedium rather than an increase in enjoyment.

Switching characters does little to alleviate the drudgery. *N3II*'s cast of fantasy archetypes each have their own combos and campaign, as well as a 'special' ability, which, in most cases, functions as little more than a way to access other portions of the map – cover star Galen can smash through barriers marked with a red glyph, for instance, whereas goblin assassin Levv can swing from predefined pieces of scenery with a grappling hook – but none genuinely alter the monotonous rhythm of gameplay.

Ninety-Nine Nights II isn't short on spectacle – taking a pair of giant flaming swords to an angry crowd could never be entirely boring. The fun, however, is spread far too thin – and players have to wade through enemies which pour in like waves of stubborn treacle in order to access it. *N3II* may aim to put players at the centre of an epic conflict, but ends up underwhelming them with superior numbers. **[4]**



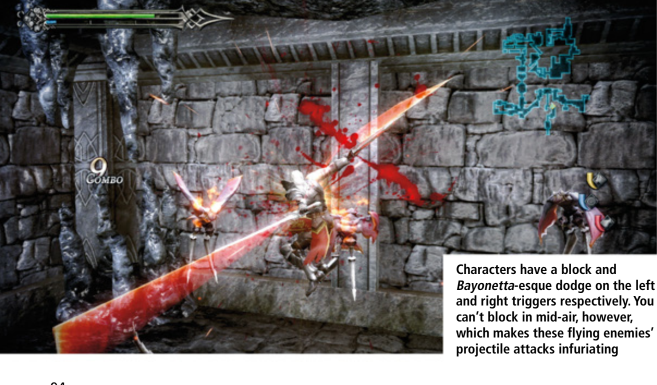
Missions will often involve AI companions, who will take out the occasional straggler but leave the rest to the player. At one point, hulking brute Maggni asks what the point is of killing hundreds of enemies if more keep coming. Quite







The hacking, slashing and magic attacks (above) are occasionally interweaved with platform sections. The awkward controls and the characters' inability to grip ledges make these sections more frustrating than they have any right to be



Characters have a block and *Bayonetta*-esque dodge on the left and right triggers respectively. You can't block in mid-air, however, which makes these flying enemies' projectile attacks infuriating

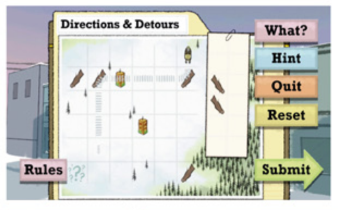


Fully powered magic attacks offer *Ninety-Nine Nights II*'s prettiest bursts of colour, though the slow rate at which your magic bar fills makes them a rare treat





The sly writing is helped by Tethers' vocals, a lovely blend of inquisitiveness and unwitting obliviousness. The supporting cast is universally excellent







NELSON TETHERS: PUZZLE AGENT

FORMAT: IPHONE, PC (VERSION TESTED), WII RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TELLTALE GAMES DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Crossword-loving spacemen. A bird-powered postal service. Gnomes. All par for the course in Scoggins, the Minnesotan town responsible for supplying the White House with erasers. When said supply dries up, the FBI sends attentive puzzle buff Nelson Tethers to investigate. Based on the bitty cartoon skits of Graham Annable's cult comic universe Grickle, *Puzzle Agent* doesn't shackle Telltale to the point-and-click traditions expected from its LucasArts revivals. Prying into Scoggins' seedy underbelly unfolds more like *Professor Layton*.

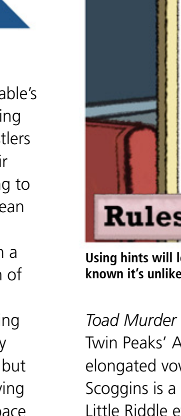
Level-5's influence takes little detective work to recognise. Tethers solves logic-based teasers to move the action forward, with bonus puzzles for prodding background props. Even Layton's hidden hint coins crop up in the form of gum: chewing the discarded candy helps Tethers concentrate. One neat addition is 'hotspot sonar', for quickly identifying clickable objects. Never again will every pixel be overturned out of puzzle-overlooking paranoia.

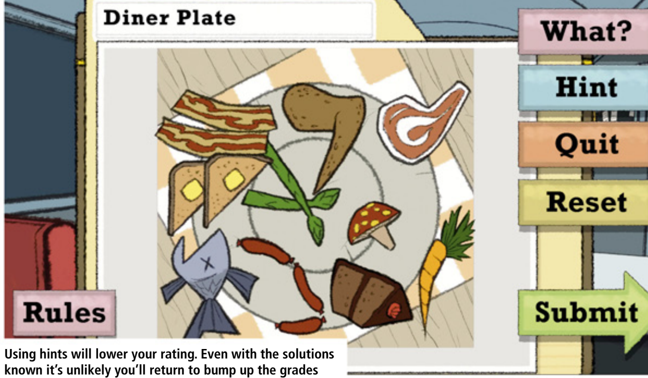
Puzzle interludes are solidly crafted, with playful cartoon presentations. Annable's drawings give them real character, offering riddles about muscular female arm wrestlers or restaurant patrons who resemble their foodstuffs. Perhaps as a result of needing to fill more than a tiny DS screen, puzzles lean towards visual and spatial tasks – laying angled logs to ricochet a skidoo through a forest, for example, or charting the path of an awkward football pass – that favour interactivity over raw cleverness. A ranking system dissuades players from mindlessly swivelling pieces until the picture clicks, but some can be accidentally completed. Trying to fit a number of objects into a tight space without overlap feels particularly haphazard, with pieces jumping from the pointer to complete links we hadn't spotted.

On the whole, Telltale's puzzle platter hits more than it misses. It should also be noted that, with 36 puzzles, *Puzzle Agent* offers a generous package compared to the slender ten of the similarly priced *Layton*-alike *Blue Toad Murder Files*. And with a taste for Twin Peaks' Americana (and a dialect of elongated vowels straight out of Fargo), Scoggins is a more engaging playground than Little Riddle ever was. Telltale supports the off-kilter atmosphere by dialling back on its usual wordplay and punchlines in favour of a more subtle wit. Agent Tethers' rambling dictaphone memos (very Agent Cooper) are a particular highlight.

The real laughs are down to Grickle's trademark dead stares and sudden bloodcurdling screams (characters' heads hinge open for toothy yells). Here, Telltale does great service to Annables' sketchy drawing style. The in-house engine, often struggling with detailed environments and 3D characters (who could forget *Monkey Island*'s cast of recycled faces?), is the perfect match for Scoggins' sparse design and rudimentary animation. In motion, or rather in its stop/start motion, it's hard not be reminded of Annable's jittery YouTube videos.

Part of Telltale's new Pilot Program, *Puzzle Agent* is designed as a one-off, testing the waters for future potential. There are kinks – Telltale needs a new book of riddles and the ending is depressingly anti-climactic – but they could be ironed out with a second go around. On the strength of this first attempt, we hope Nelson Tethers gets one. **[7]**



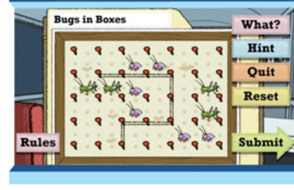


Using hints will lower your rating. Even with the solutions known it's unlikely you'll return to bump up the grades



In its own silly way, *Puzzle Agent* is surprisingly creepy. Or maybe we're just freaked out by the angry eyes of Scoggins' whispering Gnome people

The curious village

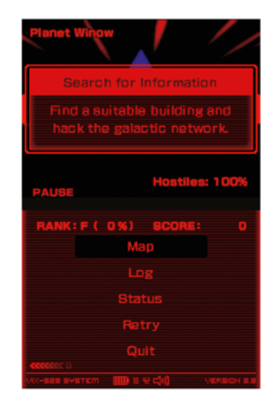


Telltale does a good job of weaving conundrums into the action. Unlike Layton's cry of "This reminds me of a puzzle", Scoggins' problems are more practical. There are broken heaters to fix, confusing woods to navigate and cryptic job adverts in need of decoding. OK, perhaps there's something a little contrived about a couple of barflies asking Tethers to segregate their insect farm, but this puzzle integration helps keep you in the world of Scoggins and feeds in to the drama of certain scenes. On a couple of occasions characters interrupt mid-puzzle and prevent Tethers from completing his task – further reinforcing the idea that these are actual events taking place in realtime. It may not be a radical revolution, but it's a nice touch nonetheless.



X-SCAPE

FORMAT: DSI RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: Q-GAMES



Do not adjust your set. *X-Scape* swaps colour schemes to keep its insubstantial environments feeling fresh. It works best when they adopt bold, garish hues

X-*Scape* could have easily crashed and burned. Q-Games' DSiWare follow-up to the 1992 Game Boy shooter *X* rolls over the same ground as *Battlezone* and *Star Fox*. But rather than rehash the same arcade-style roll, fly and shoot scenario ad infinitum the game keeps players on their toes with lively plotting, trippy visuals and play that shifts gears every few moments.

The setting is the distant future. You're the heroic pilot of VIXIV – a flying tank pivotal in fending off an alien invasion 20 years prior. Having spent the last decade in cryosleep you weren't around to see that your former partner has been busy enslaving the galaxy. And so begins a retro-styled adventure with the player exploring planets, fending off enemy drones and aiding in a rebellion against an evil emperor.

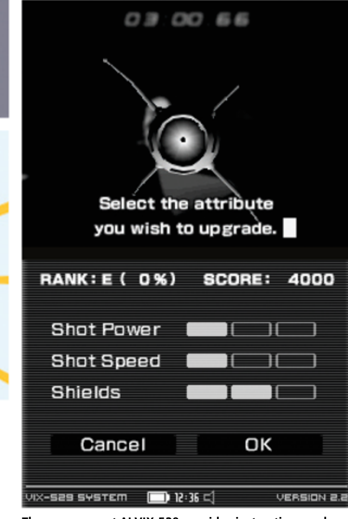
Stylus controls feel fussy at first, especially when steering the VIXIV as a tank on solid ground. Flying isn't exactly intuitive, either. Forward movement is a given, so you're mostly responsible for circling, but both blots come out in the wash. Only during particularly tricky boss battles do the touchscreen controls become more frustrating than fun. Otherwise, the lower screen is used for simple tasks such as switching from regular guns to other, more potent, explosives and making the transition from ground to air.

Play is spread across a dozen or so planets connected by warp tunnels. Traversing the expanse is done via a firstperson minigame that sends the player hurtling through a narrow passageway beset by enemies and obstacles. While not always challenging, these transitions certainly serve as effective palate cleansers.

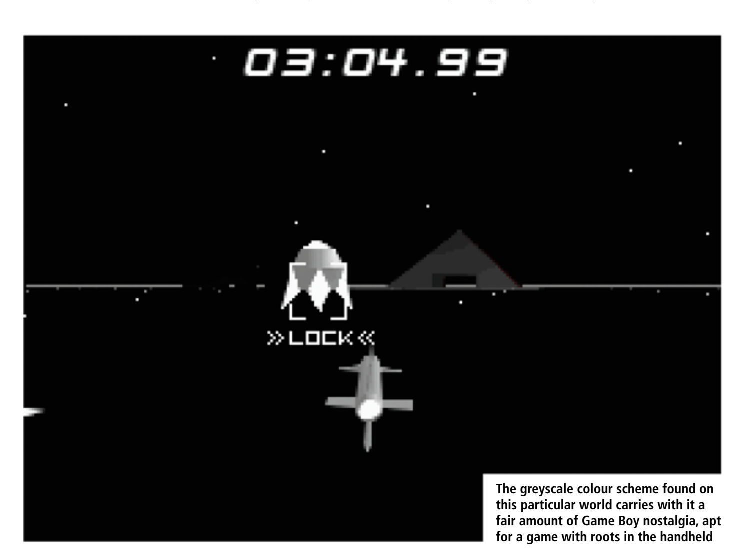
In fact, much energy and imagination appears to have been spent in keeping *X-Scape* fresh. Many of the bare-bones planet surfaces look the same, but stark changes to the game's monochrome colour scheme create a potent illusion of variety. And just as soon as one enemy or task begins to wear thin, *X-Scape* introduces a new goal, mechanic or way to play.

Further heavy lifting is accomplished by VIX-529, a levitating Sputnik of a sidekick who keeps the player up to speed on plot and mission goals. When the action gets particularly hairy his canned alerts can stack up, but his guidance and role as storyteller are welcome and necessary.

There doesn't seem to be a single element in place that doesn't serve *X-Scape*'s modest goals. And just in case one new twist doesn't do it for you, Q-Games always has a few more waiting in the wings. Loaded with unlockable secrets, secondary missions and optional backstory, *X-Scape* ably echoes the depth and breadth of more expensive, expansive games. Not bad for the unlikely sequel to a game hardly anybody played. **[8]**

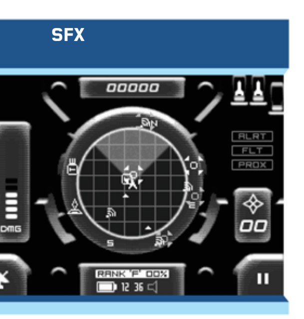


The ever-present AI VIX-529 provides instructions and narrative. Without its constant chatter, *X-Scape* would be a very different and much less interesting game



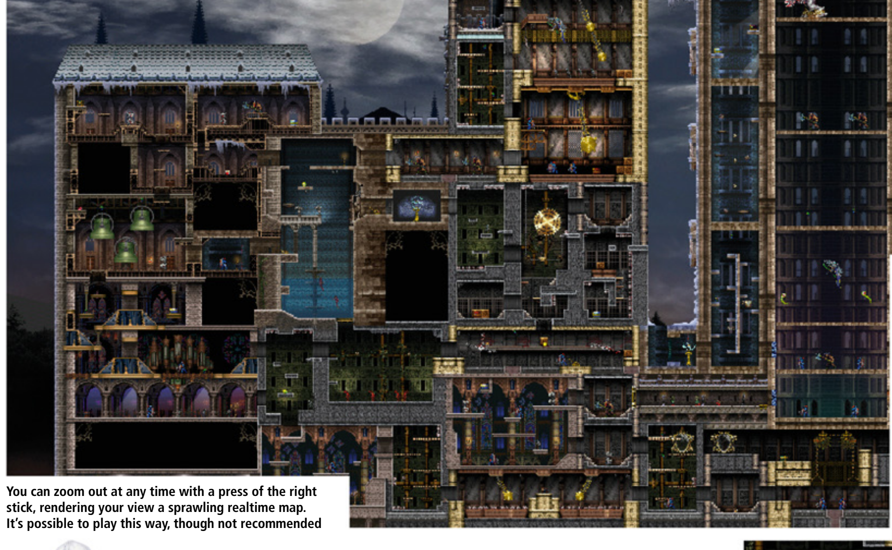
The greyscale colour scheme found on this particular world carries with it a fair amount of Game Boy nostalgia, apt for a game with roots in the handheld

SFX



Stalwart Nintendo composer Kazumi Totaka made his videogame debut working on *X*. His score for *X-Scape* straddles the bombast of big-budget movies with the minimal electronica of Kraftwerk. In both cases the approach ably recalls the synth-heavy soundtracks of beloved sci-fi flicks. Fans of gaming soundtracks are also well served by the music of *X-Scape*: Totaka's Song, a musical Easter egg buried in more than a dozen Nintendo games, makes a welcome encore here.





You can zoom out at any time with a press of the right stick, rendering your view a sprawling realtime map. It's possible to play this way, though not recommended

Harmony Of Despair gathers some of the previous games' heroes, including Soma, Alucard and Shanoa, their differing abilities allowing the protagonists to reach new areas





CASTLEVANIA: HARMONY OF DESPAIR

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: AUGUST 4
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Vampires may be in vogue thanks to Twilight and True Blood, but Konami isn't about to go easy on them. In this, the latest entry in the long-running action series, the stakes are raised further still as the formerly solo task of vanquishing the undead is reengineered into something approaching a team sport. Step forward sixplayer co-op. Far more than a cynical acknowledgement of multiplayer trends, it's a chance for the developer to make some more sweeping changes. For starters it's a robust method of demonstrating the vast zoom out that tracks players and doubles as a realtime map system, but it also drags the series farther away from its linear action roots, and into RPG territory.

Notably, the focus is more solidly on action-based dungeon crawling than ever before. The series' trademark sprawling environments are on fine form, spooling out like labyrinthine follies from an architect's Escher-inspired cheese dream, but in dividing the game into manageable, multiplayer-friendly chunks they're less imposing than some of the *Castlevania* edifices that have emerged since the passing of the 16bit era.

It's an astute tweak that adds depth but also presents problems of its own. Played alone or with friends the game suffers from too much focus. With one objective (to find and kill the boss) and a lack of respawning enemies or loot, players are forced to see through a futile quest. Death is as necessary as it is inevitable because the in-game shop, where crucial items can be purchased and spare loot sold, is only accessible from the lobby. It's a repetitious process that threatens to make grinding just that – a grind.

Fortunately, the process of scouring every room and corridor for loot is a joy in itself. Even as levels become familiar, the thrill of dispatching skeletons, hellhounds and demonic maids is undiminished. Items, magic and even special skills can be equipped at various points throughout the levels, and as a result both the combat and platforming slowly evolve and new avenues and tactics become available. It's here that repetition becomes its own reward, thanks to a robust and adaptable combat system that has the potential to subtly alter each replay.

With 3D reimagining *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow* (see p36) close on its heels, could *Harmony Of Despair* be the last hurrah for classic *Castlevania*? If that proves to be the case, it's certainly going out with a bang. The addition of multiplayer might be big news, but it's the resulting changes to the core gameplay, even in solo mode, that carry the day. **[8]**

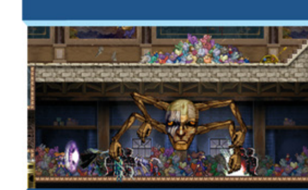




The game's building blocks will be familiar to those who've played the DS *Castlevania* games, but the characters, boss monsters and lurid decor remain just as charismatic on 360

Boss clever





As ever in *Castlevania* the bosses are a big part of proceedings – and some of them are a very big part indeed. They are also some of the trickiest the series has ever seen. Partly this is because of the huge amount of damage they can soak up, but also the imaginative ways in which they attack. The Puppet Master (above), for example, must be chased around the entire castle; fail to keep up and he can inflict magical damage unchecked.



HELSING'S FIRE

FORMAT: IPHONE **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CLICKGAMER **DEVELOPER:** RATLOOP





You can finish the story missions on a four-hour train journey. Although all levels are timed, and a score awarded, competitive types will get most enjoyment from the quick-fire Survival mode unlocked later on

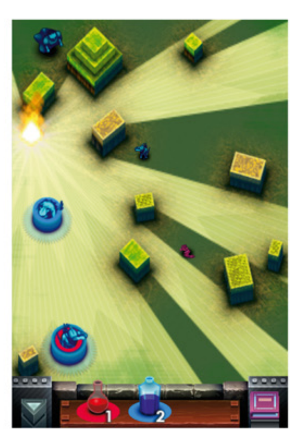
Helsing's Fire makes your finger feel awesome. Yes, the good doctor might insist that his torches were created to combat a terrible scourge, but once you've stroked the screen any banter between the Victorian gent and Watson-wannabe Raffton doesn't matter. There's light bursting out from your fingertip. That's what matters.

This is an iPhone puzzler, hardly a lean genre, but one that understands the platform and makes its central mechanic the most enticing feature. Your touch controls burning torches that cast light across the shadowed landscape. Tapping one of three tonics at the bottom of the screen then sends a coloured explosion along the light paths, burning any similarly coloured creatures in its way. Kill the baddies without scorching any sweet maidens and it's on to the next set of levels. With a smooth framerate, tactile problem-solving and bold styling, *Helsing*'s initially irresistible.

The first few static enemies take a few moments of experimentation, but the quick pacing and multitasking support (on iOS 4.0) means you never get bored. In early levels, the fresh layouts and tactics demanded have the invention and pacing of an *Angry Birds*, your initial stumblings like that first benchmark throw in *Paper Toss*.

Then it gets mean. Enemies develop immunities, requiring shrewd use of tonics and foresight to combo through their defences. The calm satisfaction of the early game gives way to twitch controls, and fine-tuning at speed and accuracy of execution replace the cunning logic puzzles of before. These stages suck in all the gimmicks, but waver between a difficulty curve and frustration, never becoming a meaty enough challenge.

Helsing's Fire's innovative mechanic holds it high above the crowds of cloned iPhone puzzlers, even if endgame clutter fumbles its potential. Still, this is a game you'll complete, chuckle at and show off. **[7]**



Tougher enemies douse your torch if touched. It's an unneeded restriction that damages the pacing



PREDATORS

FORMAT: IPHONE **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CHILLINGO **DEVELOPER:** ANGRY MOB GAMES

Of course you want to be a Predator. Stalking prey. Collecting heads. Wrist blades. Thermal imagery. Gory violence. Always a laugh. And Angry Mob Games gets the obvious stuff right: a trophy cabinet that gradually fills with skulls to glare at, a weapon rack that gets better stocked the more Honor Points you collect from kills, and over 20 snappy missions (a few of which even tie in to the movie).

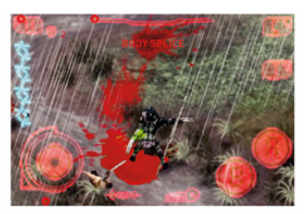
But our dreadlocked hero has a few subtlety issues. Two primary attack buttons and a D-pad suggest more nuanced combat than you get: combos are repetitive, weapon switching clunky, and enemies too stupid to encourage anything other than Wolverine-style lunges and button mashing. It's telling that certain flavours of kill are shoehorned into mission objectives: the boss Hanzo is a True Sword Master, but refuses to appear until 20 of his men have been mutilated by horizontal body cuts, the kind that just happen to come in a three-hit combo. Ranged weaponry is equally restrictive: plasma guns and disc blades have pretty effects, and can be upgraded with the Honor Points your stylish kills yield, but they're not really ranged weapons. *Predators*' fixed camera height boxes you in, favouring the shallower thrills of brutality over environmental depth.

Likewise trammelled is stealth – encouraged but never truly enabled. Invisibility is only ever a screen tap away, but without context-sensitive animations and analogue controls, actual sneaking is devoid of tension. Even worse, you still have to use 'normal' combat rather than anything as outrageous as a stealth kill.

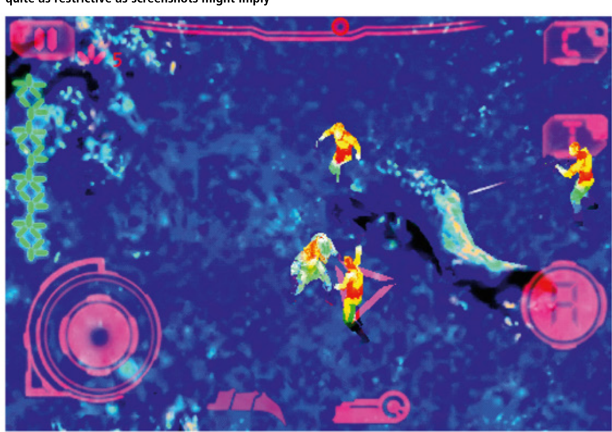
A post-movie impulse purchase of *Predators* is very tempting – it's a handsome hack'n'slasher, offering plenty of fan service. But its promise of depth is never realised, leaving a pretty but vapid experience which, in the constant churn of the App Store, will soon be forgotten. **[4]**



Trophy Kills might be some of the bloodiest yet seen on the App Store, but they're too repetitive to retain any long-term appeal, and there's little distinction within your Predator's blade collection



Thermal vision looks and sounds the part, but enemies are never disguised enough to make the switch worthwhile. The HUD, meanwhile, isn't quite as restrictive as screenshots might imply







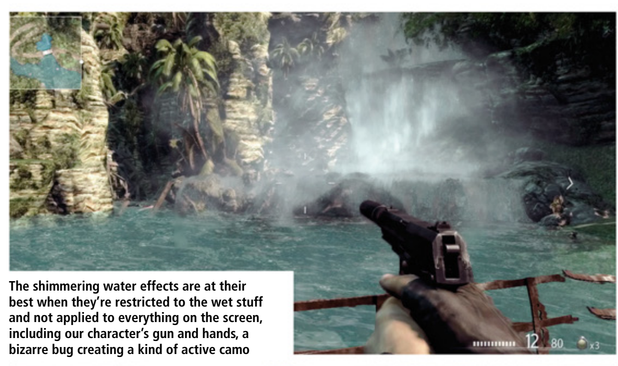
SNIPER: GHOST WARRIOR

FORMAT: PC, 360 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CITY INTERACTIVE PREVIOUSLY IN: E215

Sniper: Ghost Warrior gets one thing right: there are times at which you really do feel like a ghost. Despite looking like a freshly lacquered corpse, your character seems, on occasion, to be made of more ephemeral stuff. Able to float through walls (and the ground beneath his feet) as if they were made of thin air, and capable of flipping unpredictably between being visible and invisible to the human eye, he haunts Isla Trueno like a poltergeist with a high-calibre rifle, unable to exist anywhere else but within the confines of a purgatory as bugged as he is.

Of course, when protagonist Tyler Wells isn't phasing through walls or invisible to a soldier standing right in front of him, he may as well have swapped his ghillie suit for a Technicolor dreamcoat. Once spotted, his many enemies will never lose track of him, and make a mockery of the title's central conceit by being as accurate with a bog-standard assault rifle as you are aiming down a sniper scope.

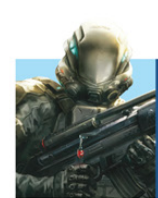
For a game about sniping, *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* has an awfully itchy trigger finger. The opening level (and isolated occasions later on) teases the possibility of a tense, quasi-realistic representation of the lone sniper experience, but quickly descends into running, gunning, *Modern Warfare* territory (interludes in which you play as strike team Delta Squad make the *MW2* aspiration explicit by featuring an assault on an oil platform). It's a shame, since the sniping mechanic – aim down the scope and your bullet's trajectory is marked by a red dot which jumps and shifts according to the player's pulse, breathing and wind speed – makes one of the genre's most familiar tools seem novel again. But in the glitchy, unpredictable world of Isla Trueno, there's just no real desire to use it. **[3]**



The shimmering water effects are at their best when they're restricted to the wet stuff and not applied to everything on the screen, including our character's gun and hands, a bizarre bug creating a kind of active camo



The game revels in its bloody, hat-removing headshots. On occasion you'll be asked to use a grappling hook, which can be particularly cumbersome when soldiers are shooting you with supernatural precision



BLACKLIGHT: TANGO DOWN

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: ZOMBIE STUDIOS PREVIOUSLY IN: E216





In theory, *Blacklight: Tango Down* is a fine idea. It's a good-looking and inexpensive online shooter, with all of the levelling up demanded by today's players. But practically anyone who contemplates buying it will already own a *COD* or a *Battlefield* or a *Halo* – and in that company it just doesn't stack up.

It's all about detail. *Blacklight* is full of features – 12 maps, seven game modes, four co-op missions and a grindingly huge amount of kit – but it's lacking in polish and balance all round. The basic guns, for example, each feel fine in their own right, but it's quickly clear that this is a game in which, occasional sniper rifle use aside, the assault rifle rules the roost.

And it has an insurmountable problem in the form of its map design. A huge number of the games we've played ended up in can-shoots, with one team trapped and respawning in their base. Enemies can't enter due to sentry guns, but they can easily wait outside. The rhythm is shot: one team simply gets on top and camps there.



Alongside all of the usual guns, special grenades have clever effects on your vision, causing your visor to show a blue screen, or scrambling a localised patch so that you can't see behind it

You can tell this is what's happening because of *Blacklight*'s one standout feature: a HUD which, when equipped, shows the position of friends and foes – but also stops you using weapons for its duration. It's a clever tool indeed, perfect for planning ambushes or assaults, and the tactical influence it could have in a better FPS is clear. In *Blacklight: Tango Down* it does little to raise the quality of a mediocre game in a genre stocked with the highest quality. **[4]**

PIX'N LOVE RUSH

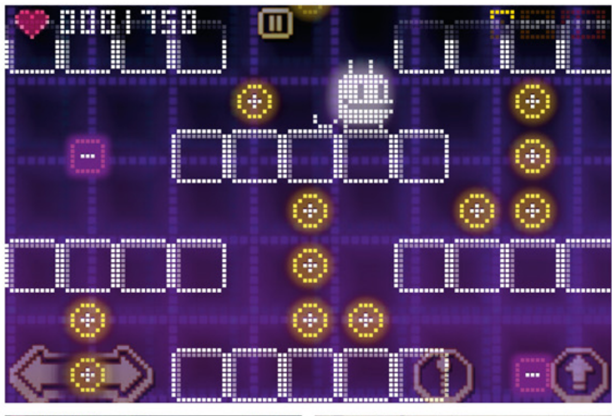
FORMAT: IPHONE **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** BULKYPIX
DEVELOPER: BULKYPIX/PASTAGAMES/PIX'N LOVE

Time breeds nostalgia, and with nostalgia often comes reverence – warranted or not. Like the recent *3D Dot Game Heroes* and *Half-Minute Hero*, French videogame blogging, archivist and aficionado collective Pix'N Love has delved into the past and dredged up inspirations for a collaboration on this passion project. *Pix'N Love Rush* riffs on a range of old-school melodies, momentarily strumming the chords of *Rainbow Islands*, *Puzzle Bobble* and even *Space Invaders* as it flits between 8bit segments.

So, guide your critter to some scrumptious cake, avoiding the nasties and protecting the lovelies. Balancing coin collection with staying on the scrolling screen is the name of the game. The crisp visuals transform in tandem with your points building, and peeling back the layered wireframe world is as much an incentive as the high scoring. It's a double-edged sword, however, as many of the visual refreshes erode the clarity of the screen, blurring and shuddering with deviously designed interference and challenging your blinking intervals as much as reflexes.

Your troubles really begin as the precision required to navigate each wave of enemies increases and the limits of the small, awkwardly positioned left/right scroll display become harder to bear. It's not progress-blocking, but it's enough of an issue for you to avoid really gunning it for the high scores as you struggle to keep up. The need to drop down between platforms is similarly hindered by a lack of cooperation between collision detection and the controls, but it's an infrequent problem that won't stop you coming back time and again.

The game evokes the mood of the old days – not least with a fantastic chiptune soundtrack – without invoking the horrors of lengthy load times, limited lives and impossible odds. *Pix'N Love Rush* is a short, budget shot of old-school gaming that plays out like a memory you never experienced, realised with a pace and vibrancy many games from yesteryear never actually possessed. **[7]**





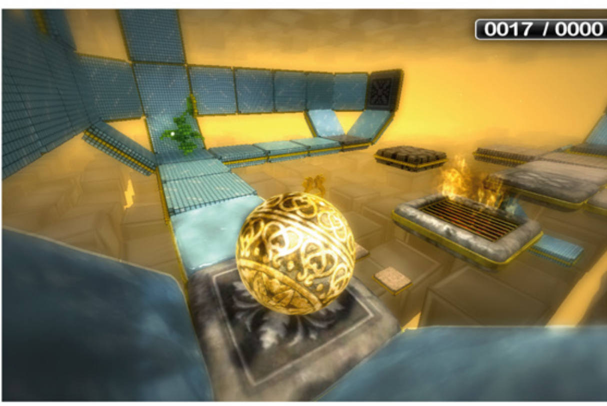


Your projectiles will head back to Earth if you don't make them count, and can harm your crusading critter. After 5-Minute Mode comes Infinite, a further opportunity to appear on the online leaderboards



PUZZLE DIMENSION

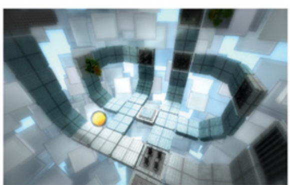
FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: DOCTOR ENTERTAINMENT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE



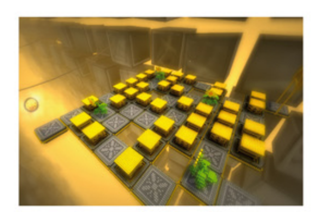
Mass, velocity, momentum – none of these things matter in *Puzzle Dimension*. Despite appearances, this is not a twitchy physics game in the vein of *Monkey Ball*, but a methodical puzzler in which your sphere's movement is no less defined than that of a chess piece. With it, you navigate a gravity-defying 3D structure made out of even blocks. Push forward, and the sphere rolls to the next block, then stops. You can bounce, too: a precise arc which places you two blocks along in your chosen direction. Simple enough – yet gravity is always relative to your ball rather than the level, meaning that, regardless of which surface you're on, 'down' is always directly beneath it.

The levels become elaborate, multi-threaded Möbius strips. Navigating them, you rotate gravity through multiple planes – the aim being to collect flowers distributed across the various surfaces. Only then can you leave the level through a portal. It's a process that is quickly complicated: ice blocks are introduced that prevent your ball from stopping; other blocks crumble away or catch fire once you've passed over them – and given the strict parameters of your movement, this means that your route has to be carefully planned so that you don't destroy blocks you'll need later.

Then there are switches, teleports, spring-boards and sand traps. Some ideas are more elegant than others: blocks which only become visible in close proximity exacerbate the challenge to your memory and spatial awareness, but at the expense of the levels' logic. Some levels are so large anyway that it's nigh impossible to intuit their structure before plunging in with extensive trial and error. Nonetheless, *Puzzle Dimension* combines a good number of tricks into a series of extremely neat challenges, which tax without wholly baffling. This means, too, that it rarely wows with the genius of its solution – but this is a well prepared, exquisitely presented, and very moreish apéritif, even if you never quite get to the main course. **[7]**



The levels are pixelated at first, but gain resolution as you traverse them – not only showing where you've been, but building a combo meter with every up-res'd brick, giving you a score for online leaderboards



There are ten groups of ten levels, each group concerned with a particular mechanic. As you progress, you unlock new groups and also visual themes which give the levels a distinct look





TOY STORY 3

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), DS, PS3, WII
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: AVALANCHE SOFTWARE

Avalanche (not to be confused with the *Just Cause* developer) gets the required tie-in business out of the way in a swift four-hour campaign. A platformer with a sideline in mild stealth and character-swapping puzzling, no one idea has time to go stale, but are likewise impossible to stitch into a coherent narrative. We don't remember Woody escaping a house flooding with coffee in the film; an unfortunate by-product of basing an action game on a character piece. No surprises, then, to see the game improve in a world of Avalanche's own making.

Toy Box mode, the meat of the game, is based on the wild west fantasy sequences imagined by the toys' human master, Andy. Here, sandbox becomes sandpit, as brief flights of imagination expand into a fully realised frontier town, a *Red Dead Redemption* with the choking parts removed. More elaborate hub than open world, Toy Box revolves around property development and the opportunity for silliness each business affords. Fashion stores deck cooing aliens with beehive hairdos, a local newspaper adds photography missions, and the jail prevents bandits from draining your coffers.

At times it mimics the modern toy scene all too well. This is a commercial world of flashy trinkets, gadgets and gizmos. Goo that shrinks and grows items, a horse with a bevy of race courses, army men to lob and fly with parachutes – these sound like lines barked from a Saturday morning TV advert. And like those products – the ones kids positively *die* without – it's remarkable how quickly they accrue dust once out of the box. Avalanche works too hard on unlockables and not the unlocking. Fetch quests and gold hoarding are the adult chores children enter fantasy worlds to avoid.

Thoughtfulness pulls *Toy Story 3* from the Pixar game mire. But when it comes to playtime, a little mindlessness can go a long way. **[6]**

Woody, Buzz and Jessie are playable; an element of character-switching is needed to pass some puzzle levels





Along with some exclusive content, players of the PS3 version can look forward to Move support via a patch promised for the autumn



ANCIENT TRADER

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: LAYERNET **DEVELOPER:** 4KIDSGAMES



How the Indie Games service has grown. We remember when it was all fresh-faced XNA experiments involving royalty-free clip art. If fast-paced strategy game *Ancient Trader* is anything to go by, it has graduated with considerable distinction.

Sumptuously drawn in the style of a 15th century naval map, *Ancient Trader* sees players sail between islands, buy cargo cheap, sell it at a profit elsewhere and blast monsters of the deep with cannon fire. It may be turn-based, but this is a real sprint to supremacy – the aim being to make enough money to upgrade your ship and take on the Ancient Guardian, a legendary sea beast whose defeat secures victory in the game. In order to maximise profits efficiently, you not only have to work out the most lucrative trade routes, but upgrade your hold to carry more cargo and boost the distance your ship is able to sail in a single turn. Exploration is required, too: you can only fight the Ancient Guardian once you have acquired three treasures, which are located in three different ports around the map.



Ancient Trader is playable in singleplayer, which sees the AI pose a very creditable challenge, and in multiplayer too. It's a little more gently paced online, as people fiddle with their upgrades and cargo, but rarely do players take more than about 30 seconds to take their turn

If you're caught on the high seas at the end of a turn, then you're vulnerable to attack, either by other unscrupulous sea dogs such as yourself, who wish to plunder your coffers, or by the various aquatic terrors that roam the waves. Sea battles are simple, but rather opaquely presented. Combatants choose from their hand of three upgradeable attack cards simultaneously, and the card with the highest number wins. The trick is that attacks are given a bonus if they're played against a card of a specific colour – a rock-paper-scissors modifier that adds a thin layer of strategy to the arithmetic. It's not perfect: close battles are often won on the basis of an early arbitrary choice, but neither are the penalties too harsh.

Breezy, beautiful and smart, *Ancient Trader* easily claims a place alongside XBLA titles like *Catan* and *Carcassonne*. It's surely a clarion call for Microsoft to improve the transparency of the Indie Games service, lest the likes of *Ancient Trader* slip beneath the waves. **[8]**



As well as filling your hold with spice, fruit or tea and selling it at a high price in lands afar, ports often have specific quests, asking you to ferry something to another island or defeat a particular monster. Choosing to do these doesn't always seem cost effective, though



TOURNAMENT OF LEGENDS

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA **DEVELOPER:** HIGH VOLTAGE



Each character has standard special moves regardless of what's equipped – our favourite is the gnarly demon's 'acid chest' manoeuvre

The Wii software library is light on 3D fighting games, with nothing to compare to the likes of *Soul Calibur* or *Virtua Fighter 5*. *Tournament Of Legends* does little to rectify that: its one-on-one combat is bare bones, its visual style irredeemably tasteless, all bound in a structure as cursory as its limited roster. But, to be fair, *TOL* at least manages to inspire a few laughs.

It's not entirely clear if this is intentional: the subject matter, a pile of mythological archetypes facing off, is instant B-movie material, a vibe carried into the costume-shop characters and lame effects. There's a weird clanking thing controlled by a chap who zooms around in a wheelchair, a red demon with three eyes, a gruff minotaur, a mouldy looking Jupiter, a cat-headed lady (really), and so on. The arenas for these legendary battles are hemmed-in circles, enlivened by the random entrance of QTE-based giant crabs and suchlike.

The combat has little finesse, with an armour-removal system more incidental than tactical, and certain special moves and abilities ludicrously overpowered. A timed counter adds a little risk/reward, but life's just too short to memorise the move timings of this motley bunch. Singleplayer mode is a series of fights bookended by amateurish comic cutscenes, the training mode is utterly pointless, and Versus only lets you share the pain. By almost any measure a poor game, then. *Tournament Of Legends*' only saving graces are the hammy acting and daft moves. Amusing as they are, though, they soon begin to pall. **[3]**



The fights are split into three acts, though getting three knockdowns instantly ends things, and in the break there's a bizarre little minigame about hammering your armour back into shape



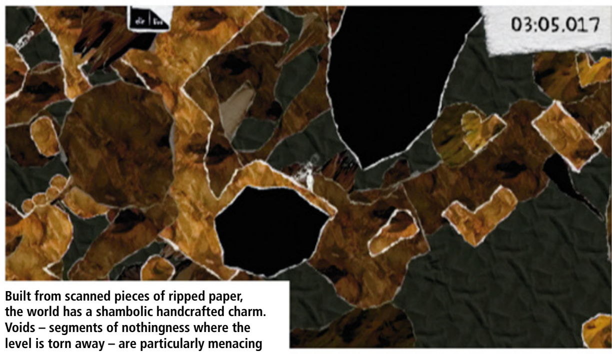
AND YET IT MOVES

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** TBC
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** BROKEN RULES

With a twist of the Remote, Broken Rules' paper world pivots around its sketchy protagonist. Freefalling mineshafts become amiable corridors at 90 degrees. Tree branches form makeshift ladders, and 180 degrees later cradle the hero from falling into the sky. Psychedelic later stages abandon any sense of physical place for candy cane spirals in need of constant recalibration and platforms that materialise and disintegrate depending on alignment. *AYIM* pushes perception to some beautifully surreal extremes – digging down through the soil to emerge above ground is particularly memorable.

Broken Rules shares Nintendo's eye for new ideas, organically introduced through simple experimentation and tossed away before they grow old. World-flipping can accelerate trampoline bounds one second and help direct a giant hamster through rock barriers the next. Cerebral hurdles are finely balanced against dextrous executions. Whether bat-shepherding, banana-rolling or bee-fleeing, each task is obscure enough to warrant a eureka moment and physically exerting enough to serve as a decent twitch challenge. Later dual-character tasks could happily support a game in their own right.

Enjoyably whipped through in three hours, *And Yet It Moves* finds rare extra pull in unlockable modes. Time Trials dare players to forgo the ground entirely and realign the stage as a heart-in-mouth freefall. At the other end of the scale, Sudden Death revels in pixel-perfect jumps and methodical play. Somewhere between the two is the option to play with a set amount of rotations, reinventing stages as conundrums to be solved. How easily one game becomes four. Originally released to disappointing PC sales in April 2009, *And Yet It Moves* gets a second chance on WiiWare. Here's hoping people make the most of it. **[8]**



Built from scanned pieces of ripped paper, the world has a shambolic handcrafted charm. Voids – segments of nothingness where the level is torn away – are particularly menacing



On top of the multiple modes, an achievements system coaxes out further experimental play. Think you can complete a stage with rotation alone? The piles of body parts will quickly suggest otherwise





THE TALES OF BEARSWORTH MANOR: CHAOTIC CONFLICTS

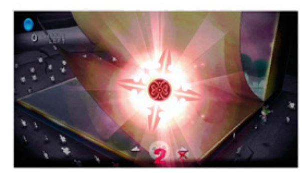
FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

The WiiWare channel has proved an unlikely home for games too piecemeal or bizarre for Live Arcade or the PlayStation Network, and Square Enix has taken to this environment more than most. Its latest experiments, the near-identical episodic twins that comprise the dark tales of Bearsworth Manor, are quite possibly the strangest pair of games it's ever released.

Using supposedly simple motion gestures, *Chaotic Conflicts* tasks you with throwing cute paper bears on to a pantomime stage, while keeping a watchful eye on the giant blue crystals that act as their base. Once there, the bears will automatically engage any intruders, but only if you've managed to hurl them close enough. Sadly, that's not as easy as it sounds.

A good tower defence game (which this could be) needs a slick and unobtrusive control scheme to give players a hope of keeping up with the ever-increasing waves of enemy troops. The Wii Remote is ideal, if it's used to point and shoot, but it seems nobody told this to Square Enix.

Hurling new units onstage is an unintuitive process, which undermines your accuracy at every step. Aiming involves waving the Remote back and forth before flicking it straight up; the strength of your flick determines the throw's distance.

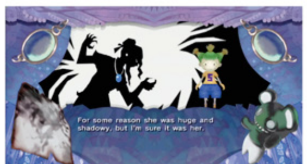


Aside from the brief chapter introductions in which the bear-spewing hero makes his minions carry the upcoming stage on their shoulders, the game doesn't do much with its picture-book aesthetic. This extremely powerful special move is a rare exception

Wrist ache is inevitable, but it's the imprecision of the strength gauge that ends up causing the most pain. Distance is all but impossible to get precisely right: the merest hint of a movement has no result, while a slightly more forceful jolt can catapult the bears offstage to their doom.

It's not such an issue starting out, but the later stages, with their multiple crystals and platforms of varying heights, require an exacting level of precision. A tower defence game in which setting up your defences can feel like an impossible challenge is an original idea, but not one we expect to take off. **[3]**







With its illustrations of twisted mother figures and of a mysteriously barren Earth, *Chaotic Conflicts*' opening makes us want to know more about the world, even if we never want to play the game again



THE TALES OF BEARSWORTH MANOR: PUZZLING PAGES

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

As with its combat-orientated twin, *Puzzle Pages* is less of a tale, more of a curious anecdote. The plot, easily the least fleshed-out part of the game, is nonetheless the most intriguing, revolving as it does around a starless, apocalyptic Earth where the only survivors appear to be a pair of twisted, Coraline-like children. It's a better setting than you'll find in many Square Enix RPGs, so it's disappointing to see it wasted on such an effortlessly lightweight puzzle game.

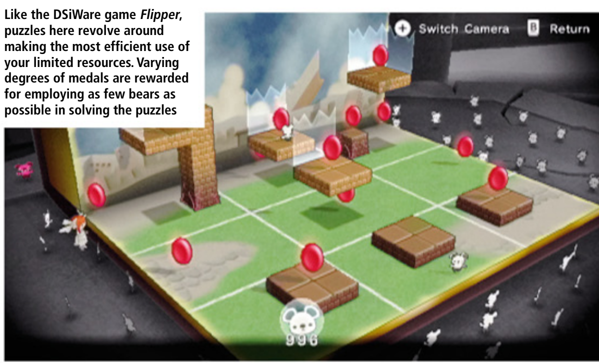
While the bear-hurling format of the game's considerably more aggravating partner remains, the origami creatures are here given a more menial and less life-threatening role. With her parents missing, and with food supplies at a minimum, heroine Pina chucks them into stages to acquire sweets. Three or four of these appear in each environment, and grabbing them all requires the careful manipulation of fire, water, bombs and so on, while keeping track of your woefully limited resources.

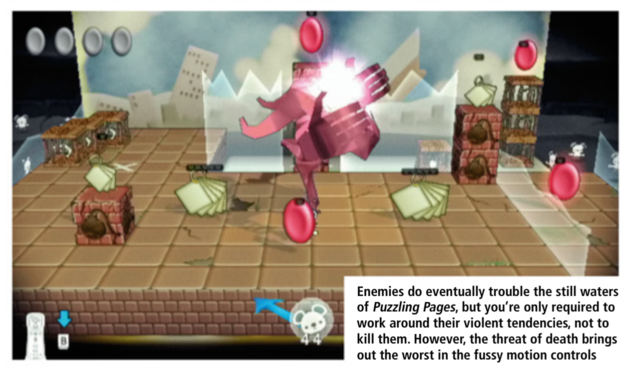
It's not overly brainy, or particularly difficult, but one slight mistake will necessitate a reload, as will errors caused by the imprecise controls the game shares with *Chaotic Conflicts*. Throwing is achieved by flicking the Remote, but it never quite seems to register inputs correctly – or if it does, the margin of error is paper-thin.

Fortunately, it's less of a sticking point here. Punting the paper creatures up to a narrow, raised platform is still absurdly troublesome, but the languid pace relives much of the frustration.

A great deal of effort has gone into the look of the game's nightmarish world, but far less time appears to have been dedicated to building a suitable format to support it. While there's an element of abstraction to every puzzle title, *Puzzling Pages*' concept feels almost thrown together, like the many scrunched-up bears that litter the game's cardboard stages. **[4]**

Like the DSiWare game *Flipper*, puzzles here revolve around making the most efficient use of your limited resources. Varying degrees of medals are rewarded for employing as few bears as possible in solving the puzzles





Enemies do eventually trouble the still waters of *Puzzling Pages*, but you're only required to work around their violent tendencies, not to kill them. However, the threat of death brings out the worst in the fussy motion controls

REGION SPECIFIC:

GEORGIA, USA

To an outsider, it can be difficult to truly comprehend the vastness of the United States of America. With an area of 60,000 square miles, the state of Georgia alone is large enough to be a country – one which would represent the 28th largest economy in the world – and while North American culture implies a homogenisation across the states, each one has its own unique feeling.

Georgia's vibe is a diverse, historic one. Though often referenced in recent history as host the 1996 Summer Olympics (or perhaps as the home of Coca-Cola), it served as the birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr and the civil rights movement, a lasting legacy that influences the cosmopolitan feel of its capital, Atlanta.

Indeed, these unique aspects are the things that the local, growing, game development community is keen to crow about rather than the more obvious aspects driven by government investment in the industry, such as an aggressive incentive plan. Low cost of living, mild weather and a positive work/life balance seem much more important to their day-to-day lives, and the state's strong history of education, which has resulted in a well-funded university system that prides itself on its number of scholarship students, ensures that future graduates will not only be looking to stay in Georgia, but will be among the most diverse and well-educated to enter the game industry.

In a world where the US is often thought of as little more than New York's skyscrapers and taxi cabs on the east coast, Los Angeles' palm trees and starving actors on the west, and Texas cowboys in the middle, Georgia is doing its best to stand out, and with a largely independent and growing development community, it soon will.







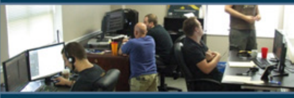




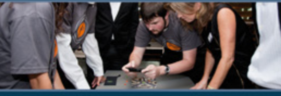




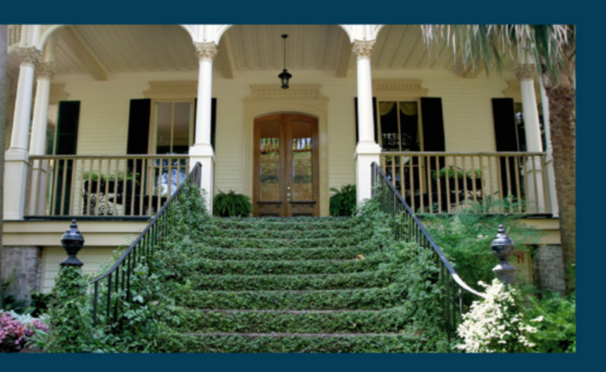
















GEORGIA ON OUR MINDS

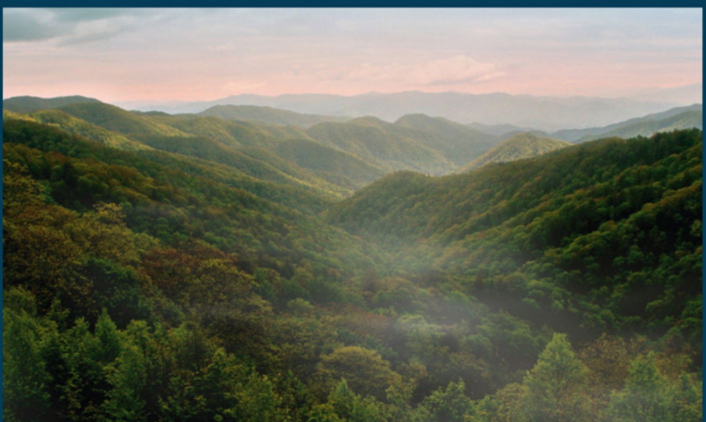
One small bite of the Peach State reveals a region with a serious game plan

Many of the locations we've visited in our long-running, globe-spanning Region Specific series have already been familiar to us. Georgia, however, was something of an unknown. And, with only a few short days to experience it – and all from the vantage point of Atlanta's Metropolitan Area – getting an accurate taste of the region seemed like an impossible task. While we managed to experience some Atlanta living, with the city featuring a diverse range of restaurants and lively bars (which still allow smoking – to some a benefit, to others a negative), we felt it best to leave to the developers themselves the task of explaining just why Georgia as a state is attractive to the game development community.

> "Atlanta is a small-town big city, where people know each other, folks are friendly, and life goes a little slower. It's just a normal place, with normal people"

Asante Bradford, though admittedly not a game developer, works as the state's digital media liaison (Georgia is one of the only states to have a staff member dedicated to the game industry entirely), and knows the region's benefits better than most. He begins with a familiar topic – incentives.

"The state of Georgia has an entertainment tax credit for the games industry," Bradford tells us. "It's a 30 per cent tax credit for games companies creating digital content for distribution. Our credit is one of the most aggressive and competitive incentives in the United States, and we're pretty excited about it. There's a 20 per cent base tax credit and a ten per cent 'uplift' which requires that you





put the Georgia logo in the credits; do that and you'll get the full 30 per cent."

However, Bradford admits there is some small print attached to the benefit: "The state has a minimum scale spend of $500,000 within the tax year to be able to qualify for the tax credit."

While this sets the barrier for entry rather high, those that have been able to take advantage of it – such as CCP and Xavient – speak highly of what it has enabled them to do, certainly in terms of opening them up to hiring more staff. But much more surprising is the response from the smaller studios that haven't been able to take advantage of it. There's no bitterness here, simply a concentration on the other aspects of Atlanta that make it a good place to develop entertainment software.

"The state's financial incentives aren't really of much use to small companies, to be honest," says **Ian Bogost**, a professor at Georgia Tech well known for his work at independent developer Persuasive Games and his Independent Games Festival entries such as *A Slow Year*. "Beyond that, there's a great community here, and for what we do, we're really valued and praised for our work for its own sake. There's a great community here that extends beyond the games industry, and I appreciate that."

Most importantly, and following a trend that was repeated again and again by the developers we spoke to, Bogost talks of Geogia as where he lives, rather than merely works. "It's nice to be able to work where I live rather than to live where I work," he smiles, before going into detail on what is specifically attractive about Atlanta.

"Atlanta is a conveniently located, affordable city with a mild climate and a wide range of available cultural activities. It's a small-town big city, where people know each other, folks are friendly, and life goes a little slower. It's just a normal place, with normal people. That may sound anticlimactic, but









after living in Los Angeles and New York, it's something of a relief!"

Michael McMain, of Xaviant, agrees: "Even though this isn't really at the centre for gaming by any means, it is still an attractive place for people to come and live. The cost of living is typically better that some of the other well-developed gaming markets, and there are people on the west coast working in the industry on a salary that only allows them to rent an apartment, and here less would allow them to own a home. It's a very big difference and very attractive. Also, as a metro community, Atlanta is pretty easy to get around: there is obviously traffic and so forth, but it's not quite as centrally congested as places like LA or some other cities."

Though not currently a well-known gaming centre, one other aspect that developers return to is the strength of local educational establishments at growing talent as well as the huge resource of other industries within Georgia, such as the broadcast industry (Atlanta is the home of Turner Broadcasting, owner of channels including CNN, Cartoon Network and Peachtree TV). Hi-Rez Studio's **Erez Goren** explains: "Atlanta may not be known for having a lot of games studios, but it does have a lot of resources that are very good, including the Savannah College of Art and Design, which has an enormous number of people come out into the art and gaming field. There are a lot of hi-tech and software developers too, as there are a lot of consumer companies located here. In general, it's a very good place to be, because individuals that live here or come to school here, they come to prefer to stay here."

The state has also worked to grow the university system to match the growing game industry, with









"Atlanta may not be known for having a lot of games studios, but individuals who live here or come to school here, they come to prefer to stay here"

Bradford adding that the state now has roughly 16 universities offering some form of game-related courses on their curriculum.

"It's growing every day," he says. "And what's really great is the diversity in the programming for all of these colleges. They're all hitting different aspects of the games industry. There's Georgia Tech, which is more engineering and programming; SCAD, which is more into the arts side; Columbus State University, which is more into the simulation aspect."

Also beneficial to diversity is the 'hope scholarship' which allows in-state students who maintain a B-grade average to receive funding towards their university fees, and an increased interest from the state in getting game development seen as a viable career even by high school students.

"Even at the high school level, there is videogame programming," Asante says. "We're trying to get more of our high schoolers more actively involved in this industry. I think with the scholarship opportunities, you're going to see a lot more people realise they can make a living creating games. We call it the home-grown initiative. A lot of our work is, of course, attracting companies to set up here, but it's also also to grow what we already have."



SOUTHERN STRATEGY

Though the popular view is that Georgia is a nascent region when it comes to game development, companies here have worked on some well-known games, and they are well represented at our roundtable, with **John Gibson**'s Tripwire Interactive having released both *Red Orchestra: Osterfront 41-45* and *Killing Floor*, **Todd Harris**' Hi-Rez Studios behind the recently released MMOG *Global Agenda*, and CCP's representatives **Chris McDonough** and **Mike Tinney** well versed in development via *EVE Online*. That's not to say that the names around the table whose companies have yet to release titles – such as **Michael McMain** (Xaviant) and MENUe's **Ron Williams** – are any less valuable to the Georgia scene, as our discussion illustrates. Joining the session is the state's digital entertainment liaison **Asante Bradford**, Georgia Tech's **Ian Bogost**, SCAD's **Tony Tseng**, SPSU's **Jon A Preston** and Entertainment Arts Research's **Jonathan Eubanks**.

So, the obvious one first: why Georgia?
Mike Tinney: We were already here as White Wolf, but after the merger with CCP what happened in the year that followed was pretty critical in allowing us to grow as rapidly as we did. Asante entered the picture and Georgia became an aggressive national player in the business of incentivising videogame development. I think within two years they came up with the most aggressive, best tax incentive in the country, which made us feel really clever for being so ahead of the curve! We went from a studio of 20 in 2006 to our current weight of 165. It's been a wild couple of years, and we couldn't have grown that quickly if it hadn't been for the incentives.
Michael McMain: Was that growth mostly organic?
MT: Seventy per cent of our hires have been brought in from outside. And that's not just from within the US, I'm



A dynamic region with a variety of incentives and a range of startup companies, Georgia has put itself on the gaming map. Here, its players discuss how they got here, and where they're headed

talking from around the world to fill a niche in the games industry; MMOs are a pretty rare skillset so we've found ourselves combing the world for people that have the right combination of skills and attitude. How about you?
MM: Most of my team has been together for about 15 years. We're just under 50 and we don't plan to go past much more than that. About 30 of us were together originally, about 20 we've hired from outside markets, people that had shipped games, as we're trying to come out the gates with a triple-A title, so the experience is important.
MT: Are you with a publisher?
MM: Not yet, we're self-funded.
Todd Harris: I think it's interesting how many of the companies in Georgia are independent startups. I suppose it depends on your interpretation of independent, but if you take it in terms of able to fund their own projects, there's Hi-Rez, CCP, and so on. It's interesting that this small, growing scene has started independent. For myself on why Atlanta specifically, well there used to be this cheesy saying in Atlanta – sorry, Asante – "Every day in Atlanta is opening day," but if you look around, everything is new here, not just in the gaming industry, though we're at the forefront of that. I really feel like we're prospectors in a gold rush. In addition to our experienced hires, we've had about a third of our hires locally just out of schools or self-taught in Atlanta, and another third that was Atlanta talent just from another industry. I've certainly seen a lot of talent locally.
John Gibson: How many of the developers here aren't independent? None? That's pretty exciting. For us, we started out as a distributed team, with people all over the world, and when we went to create a studio we wanted to find a place that wasn't cold and had a reasonable cost of living. When we started we had high aspirations and not a lot of money, and it



was one of the reasons we first looked at Atlanta seriously after my wife mentioned it to me, as she's from here.

TH: I think a lot of us had roots here already, but as Mike said, for us when it came to decisions about how to staff up or complement our staff with outsourcing the incentives allowed us to keep as much as possible in house.

Chris McDonough: Has anyone had any trouble with stereotypes about Georgia? No? I've had people from California come expecting pick-up trucks and rednecks… And they're like, "Wow, it's nothing like that!" You know, we had the Olympics here… [Laughter]

MT: If you look at Atlanta statistically, it's in the top five or top ten of most categories for metropolitan areas. It rarely occupies the number one seat – perhaps the biggest aquarium and largest airport – but an overall spread in the top five is really strong.

CM: I think we're the most broadband-enabled city.

Ron Williams: There is definitely a core internet history here. Another under-appreciated fact here is that Georgia is, I think, sixth in the country in terms of population, so if you look at Google Analytics

TH: We had the most success with people who had roots here and then went to work in the game industry elsewhere, usually California, and they now want to settle down and have a family.

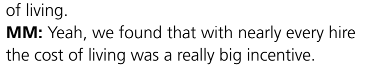
MT: Sure, in that case you don't have to cross the 'education' hurdle; they already get the advantages.

IB: We've started to see it more and more with our graduates. Not only are they interested in maintaining roots, but they don't want to get involved in a certain kind of lifestyle. They already sense that, yeah, they could take those job offers, and those numbers do look good, but they don't want to get into an unsustainable lifestyle of financial demand that is inevitable in certain parts of the country – I'm trying not to name names – but in the last year we've had many students turn down what

"If you look at Atlanta statistically, it's in the top five or top ten of most categories for metropolitan areas"

there are a lot of your gamers in Georgia. It's an important market to understand and be a part of. And everyone is always surprised about how cosmopolitan Atlanta is. It isn't perhaps representative of the rest of Georgia, but, you know, as the birthplace of civil rights, this really is a much more cosmopolitan place than people expect, so it's a place with a very low cost of living while still offering that big city experience.

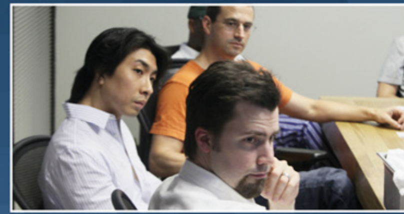
CM: You have the option of being able to live in the city or live in the suburbs and maintain that low cost of living.



MM: Yeah, we found that with nearly every hire the cost of living was a really big incentive.

JG: We actually have a problem convincing people that the cost of living here is what it is. You tell them you can get a house here, a nice house, for $200,000, and they'll just laugh at you.

Ian Bogost: I don't think it's just cost of living. I mean, cost of living is an easy thing to point to, but Georgia is just a 'real' place. People live here because they want to. A lot of our students at Georgia Tech who move to California or Florida or Texas, places where the games industry thrives, don't really want to. They'd rather stay here. And the state that funds Georgia Tech would much rather they stayed here too to create jobs in the state. So when you ask a question like 'why' your region or your city, it's tempting to expect some kind of silver bullet answer, but Georgia is really just a nice place to live. And live, not just work.







appeared to be good job offers in California because that's not a lifestyle that they want. They know they can accomplish a lifestyle here differently; they might have to form their own path, but they're not going to spend their whole day in the office.

JG: One of the biggest issues we have recruiting is not necessarily Georgia-centric – though we know there are lots of people out there who imagine a barren wasteland between New York and San Francisco – but that people worry that there aren't a lot of other game studios here. They have a fear that if they relocate here from somewhere else that if things didn't work out they'd have nowhere else to go. That's getting better – we've got CCP, Hi-Rez, Xaviant, you know, there are more companies now – but the more we can get the word out that there is a community here, the better.

CM: There are also places like Turner [Broadcasting], which are not necessarily just game development, but they do hire a huge amount of people over there.

IB: I think that's a good point – it's maybe not so great to be so insular, to have a really coherent but segregated games industry. We may not have as big an industry as other parts of the country, but it's a little more integrated into the overall cultural and economic sphere.

CM: How many companies are there?

Asante Bradford: Over 70 now, and when I started there were about 30 to 40, so it's amazing to see the organic growth with startups. Georgia really lends itself to startups.





work/life balance. I think a lot of us, because we're independent, we have the flexibility to do that. In our case, Hi-Rez was founded as a project of passion. Our founder is a multi-millionaire and could have retired two companies ago, and instead of collecting yachts he wanted to build his MMO. His whole mindset from the beginning was: 'Let's do this for the fun of it'.
MT: You've launched and are now serving a live product; have you found a pace change with that?
TH: Yeah, we definitely did. The first four years of *Global Agenda* were definitely a honeymoon. We weren't approaching crunch; we were lucky if we were getting 40 hours out of folks, and it was a very sustainable path right up until about two months from release, where we instituted what we needed to do to hit ship date, which we did. Since then we've definitely found our average hours go up because we are obligated to serve the community and that's worked well. We're just now getting that managed back down to a sustainable pace.
MT: The joke in the MMO industry is that the work starts when you launch…
TH: That's no joke, let me tell you!

MM: One aspect of this isn't how many companies are here, so much as how many games come out of here. That's another huge aspect. It's actually in all of our interest to ship games. If we ship a game, people can point to Xaviant and say, well, they shipped a game, and they're here, or when you ship your game, you ship yours… I used many of the other companies here to draw people here. I think that's one of the interesting things about this industry, the 'co-operatition'. We don't really compete against each other; people typically spend as much disposable income on as many games as there are to enjoy, so it's really the more that we can ship. It's maybe worth giving thought when someone is trying to get something off the ground, a new studio comes to the region, that we all pool together to really try to help them, mentorship, because we can only help.
JG: Well, then what we really need is for our people to not spend all day playing *EVE Online*…
[Laughter]
CM: We have the same problem with *Killing Floor*!
[Laughter]
RW: I've got a question: is there a cultural difference when it comes to crunch time in Georgia?
MT: I can't comment – I know our team downstairs is crunching.
CM: Yeah, but I'll be honest with you, it's not like what I've seen at other games companies.
MM: It's not Rockstar's kind of crunching?
CM: No, not at all! Our CEO was over and he asked me how it was going two weeks before we shipped something and I said: "Really uncomfortable! No one is here working all night long! Something must be wrong!" I was sure that being on schedule couldn't possibly be right. People are working extra time, but it's not been crazy. I feel for the first time that my team's work/life balance is spot on. That's a goal that you set for yourself that you think you'll never achieve.
MM: It might be hard for us to compare because we're all independent. If you have a publisher telling you they're going to pull your funding if you don't ship…
JG: It's hard to say if it's a cultural thing. I know we did a ten-month crunch to get the company off the ground, and that was the owners so it's a little different, but since then we've really tried to strike a really good balance and not have really long crunches. If we see something start to slip, we'll crunch for a week or two rather than a three-month stretch later. It's funny because I was talking to one of my employees who had been working a lot of overtime, and no one had asked him to, and I actually said: "You know, you should probably work less." It feels weird to say that, but I've told it to a lot of new hires. People are more productive if they're enjoying their life. When we've done any longer crunches, you see towards the end, people are working at half speed.
TH: I think there is a regional bias. I was in the software industry here and it seems like we got stuff done while still placing a premium on
JG: If you're lucky, that's when the work starts!
TH: That's right, you don't want to be idle.
Tony Tseng: I just want to mention that the collaborative spirit that we have, the sense of community, is something I've never experienced outside of Atlanta. I was very surprised and very impressed by how friendly people are here, and I'm taking about the collaboration not just between academic institutions, but between the academic institutions and the studios. I was able to email the head of all of these studios directly to talk about internships. When I was in New York I had a very difficult time finding internships, because when the companies were asked about internships they'd brush you off with: "Go to our website – you can find the information there." It's a completely different atmosphere. People are willing to work together here, which is really amazing. You can see Hi-Rez people at a CCP event and vice versa, I'm really impressed by what Atlanta can offer. Not just living costs, not just mild weather; what makes Atlanta different is the people.
JG: What is everyone's opinion of outsourcing? Back when we were in the position of chasing publisher money, publishers would tell us we'd have to outsource most of our artwork to third-world countries or they wouldn't deal with us.
MT: Well, it's a tool, it's a lever. If you're trying to get a lot of work done in a short period of time you can outsource if you need to do that, but if you have a sustained project where you think

you're going to need that talent for a long period of time, it's probably cheaper to hire. Even when you outsource outside your region these companies have their own overheads and people to pay.
MM: I think not outsourcing is kind of what got this industry a bad name to begin with. The typical history in the past is that a company would staff up to 150 per cent of what they need, ship, and then liquidate staff. Then another project would come and they'd staff up again. I think it's fantastic to outsource. We plan to do it.
TH: You have to do it at the right time and on the right project. We iterate a lot and we've found out that, forget about in another region, if you're in another room communication isn't as good. Proximity is everything when it comes to creativity and so if you're in that iterative state where things are changing, it's too soon. If you're in production stage and the requirements can be communicated clear enough, then it's a good tool.
JG: We've found places where it works and where it doesn't. The edict of "You must outsource" I think is a little crazy.
CM: For us it's not an edict, it's simply a matter of proportion. At some point, when we move into full production, we're going to have 300 to 350 artists working at one time on the project, and there's simply no way to find a space where we can house or even hire that many people. And outsourcing is scalable – it can accommodate your needs in a way that would simply take us years to build. Over three years we've grown to 150. To try and grow to 350 artists in two years would be insanity, especially if we're not going to keep them.
JG: We did notice that when we started to look at outsourcing companies, a lot of them were charging so much that there was a lot of stuff we could do cheaper in house.
MT: I don't think it's cheaper. It's faster and more scalable. Sometimes you can find it a little cheaper, and sometimes it isn't, but what you do get is a massive scalability.
RW: It's a competitive thing as well, in the art area in particular. If you have to get a lot of assets out against a production schedule, not only is it scalable but it's just dollars you can spend elsewhere in-house, with more game designers or more community management, for example. It's a balance, but MENUe heavily outsources.
CM: But it's a good point that you don't do it until you're ready. We've jumped the gun a few times and got burned; we didn't spend a lot, but we spent more than we should have. But it's tough when you're looking at a production schedule and trying to judge a few months down the road, because it can take that long to build those assets, where you are going be.

How do the local universities plug into the local development scene?
TT: Like I said, there is amazing collaboration. SCAD and Georgia Tech, it's not just between us, but we work together to host a lot of events, and have worked on a lot of research projects together.
IB: If we're doing our jobs right at the university, then two things happen. One is that we have good relationships with not just companies here but companies everywhere and our students get jobs and internships and they get to lead gratifying, viable lives, but another is that we push on the assumptions that companies make about the industry. I mean, a lot of that stuff about outsourcing is fine, but it's pretty boring! It needs to get done, but in five years we're not going to be making the same games we are today and in ten they're going to be doing things that we can't even imagine, and so the idea of plugging in to the industry for funnelling students into jobs is not of interest to us at all. It's rather to produce these incredibly well-rounded young people who have backgrounds that you can't get elsewhere, who are not just cogs to be put into a development process but are thought leaders and making their own things and starting their own companies, doing their own stuff and pushing the medium in different directions. Not just MMOs, not just shooters – all of that stuff is awesome and I'm sure we'll have them in many decades hence – but to take games and just move them in a whole bunch of different directions; technically, socially… I do a lot of work currently with games related to news and journalism – what's the future of that? That kind of question doesn't get asked in the industry, and it doesn't need to get asked in the industry; it's about putting your nose to the grindstone and getting games done.

That's my perspective from the outside, but we have a lot of interaction with SCAD, especially now they have an Atlanta campus; we did the Art History of Games conference which had a few hundred people come from all over the world which, you know, doesn't usually happen in Atlanta for games, and like Tony said there are research collaborations that are almost completely seamless; students go directly between research



"At some point, when we move into full production, we're going to have 300 to 350 artists working at one time on the project"

don't come out and get jobs here, but the number of companies active here is still relatively small. Even if there's 70 companies active, a lot of them are startup level, very few are studios of more than 50 people, and even those that are larger tend to be still filling in their senior and intermediate ranks to build teams that have the skills and backgrounds to accomplish what they're doing. For example, in our case, it'll be a couple of years before we'll be able to meaningfully engage local universities and begin to develop a feeder program where we are hiring double-digit numbers of entry-level people, where we have the ability in our staff and our facilities to train a new workforce into our methodologies, and I imagine most other studios in Atlanta are in a similar position.

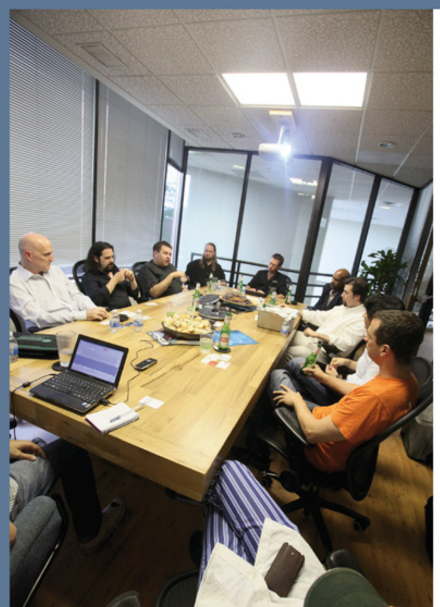
TH: We're doing single-digit numbers because we've been around for a while and we are in that 50-person ballpark, but with the tools and engine that we've got we've got a very active internship project with Southern College of Art and Design and Georgia Tech; we've hired a former intern from Georgia Tech and multiple from SCAD. There is a feeder there, it's a small hose, not a huge hose, but there are so many adjacent industries here, whether it's about going to Turner [Broadcasting] and doing animation there or doing sound work somewhere else, and I still think it's worthwhile to have those kind of experiences before coming into the games industry. Not everyone will end up with a job in the games industry – there are not enough jobs – but many will end up with at least a job in the Georgia area.

MM: The industry itself doesn't really lend itself to this, either. What's interesting about this industry is all that matters is what you've shipped. When people come to get jobs, their primary interest is: if they get a job with us will they ship a game? Because it doesn't really matter if there are other studios here – if you don't ship the game that's a negative. And you can have people that are very, very skilled and with a lot of history who still can't find a job because they haven't shipped a game. As the market develops more and we get games coming out of here, and people start to see Georgia as a strong development marker, that will change.

TH: I think developers place too much emphasis on having shipped. The real thing you're trying to evaluate is: can this person finish what they've started? Because starting things is easy, finishing them is hard, especially in gaming where we have a lot of dabblers. I think we've succeeded globally in our recruiting process because we don't put an emphasis on having shipped games versus the ability to finish a project. We've got a lot of great young talent that, back to Ian's point, challenges our convictions – because the industry changes so quickly, if you've shipped three games in a past generation that's good experience you can leverage, but if you don't know the latest tools it kind of doesn't matter.

JG: We get a lot of applicants that can show off all the games they've shipped, but actually they were a contractor and they did a chair in one game, a window in another, and they can say: "I've shipped three games!" You really have to look at how long they've been somewhere. If they have a skillset, it doesn't matter if they joined in the last month – can they finish something?

AB: From a state level I'd like to say I agree with Mike. We're really in the infancy stage, but what's really exciting is that we've had so many universities come online, such as SPSU in the last couple of years, and of course SCAD and Georgia Tech are some of the top universities in the world, but many of our universities are looking at different parts of the gaming space, such as simulation. In the last few months maybe four more local universities have come online with gaming curriculums. But also – and we call this the "Young and the Restless" – within the whole south east, once these graduates finish, Atlanta is where they want to go. As we grow this industry in the next few years, even more talent is going to be coming soon.



groups without thinking about institutional barriers. It may sound not that interesting, but it's actually pretty rare in academia.

TT: I've never heard of it outside of Georgia.

CM: Right here at CCP we hosted an IGDA event where we brought in 150 people and served dinner, and went through an MMO development process, and we also did one for GGDA, the Georgia Game Developers Association, a few weeks ago where we invited people to our office just to look around, talk to our management and staff, ask questions and meet people face to face.

JG: How many people go to our monthly game developer meet-ups? That's a really good place to go if you're looking to help out academia, because a lot of students come as well as game developers and impromptu sessions can start up where you can discuss with students how to get into the games industry and give them a lot of feedback about what we're looking for, what they can focus on, what they can improve on.

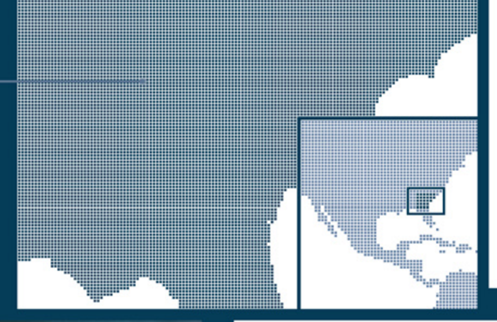
MT: I think the Atlanta videogames industry has to perceive that it has to mature and grow before it becomes a meaningful destination for students coming out of Georgia universities. Not that students



CCP NORTH AMERICA

An American white wolf and an Icelandic fox become one in a world of darkness

- **NAME:** CCP North America
- **LOCATION:** Stone Mountain
- **FOUNDED:** 2006 (upon merger between White Wolf and CCP)
- **EMPLOYEES:** 170
- **URL:** www.ccpgames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *EVE Online*



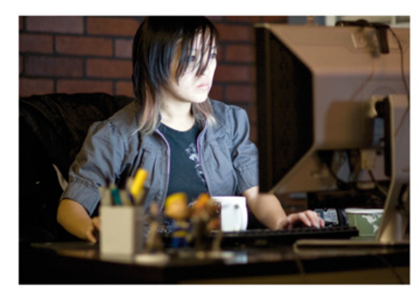


CCP's base is in Stone Mountain, eastern DeKalb County, Georgia

Created in a merger in 2006, CCP's Georgia studio has existed since 1991 as pen-and-paper roleplaying game company White Wolf, under which banner the company continues to publish RPG books and supplements. Most famous for Vampire: The Masquerade, part of the World of Darkness RPG system (familiar to PC gamers through cult hit *Vampire: The Masquerade: Bloodlines*), White Wolf has a long history of creating designs and fiction for players to create their own stories, an ability it now puts towards creating content for *EVE Online* and developing an as-yet-untitled MMOG set in the World of Darkness.

Despite White Wolf's long history, it's clear visiting the studio in Stone Mountain, one of the outer suburbs of the Atlanta Metropolitan Area, that the company has fully integrated with CCP – developers talk just as warmly of CCP-led benefits, such as yearly company-wide holidays (the last to a resort in Mexico) and on-site cooking staff as they do of White Wolf traditions (including a Dungeons & Dragons group that has been running since the company began, and has a waiting list to join).

As president **Mike Tinney** explains, it's like the companies were meant for each other, despite how unusual the merger of an Icelandic MMO developer and American RPG publisher seems. "We met the CCP guys at GenCon [a large board/pen-and-paper-gaming oriented convention] in 2005, and they were developing an *EVE* card game at the time and looking for a publisher in the offline games industry around about the same time that White Wolf was realising that most of the kinds of people who would take up pen-and-paper gaming in the next generation were kids who were finding a similar sort of experience with MMOs," he says. "We realised that in order to continue to grow our IP and grow the company we needed to figure out how to involve that in our long-term plans. Both companies started talking to each other, and after about a year we decided that we would team up."



As White Wolf, the company was also responsible for the Exalted fantasy roleplaying game, in which players gain godlike powers



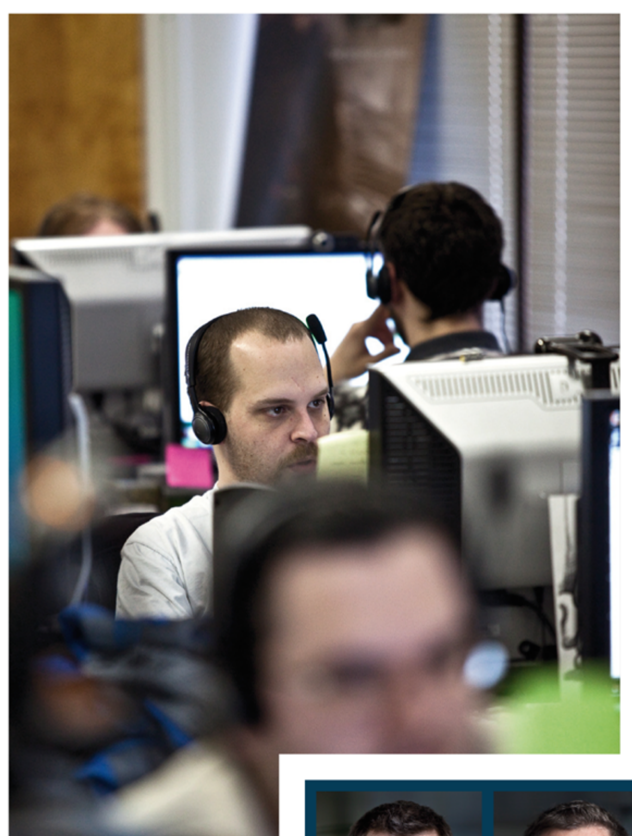




EVE Online, CCP Games' MMORPG space simulation, is set 21,000 years in the future and sees human colonies in another galaxy cut off from home after the collapse of a wormhole, and attempting to rebuild society. There are more than 5,000 accessible star systems









Interview: Mike Tinney and Chris McDonough

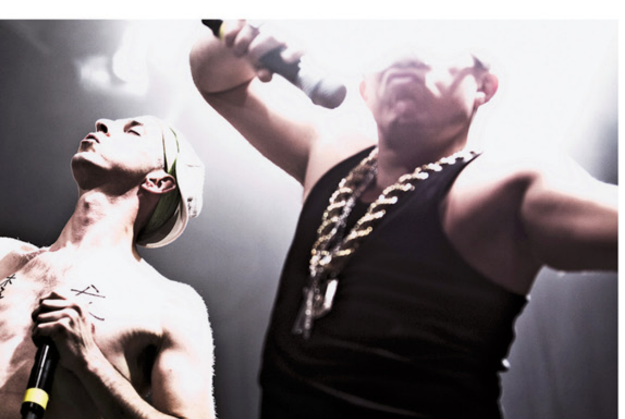
President ■ Senior producer ■

How is CCP's Georgia facility integrated with its other studios?
Mike Tinney: We are working hard on our own project here in the North American office, but we also provide a lot of support to CCP. We have an *EVE* content team – in fact all of the *EVE* content is generated out of this office. We also have a customer service team; customer service is globally distributed between the offices plus a satellite team, so we have 24-hour coverage for *EVE Online*. Most of the North American activities are centred on the things where we have a regional advantage or the World of Darkness project.

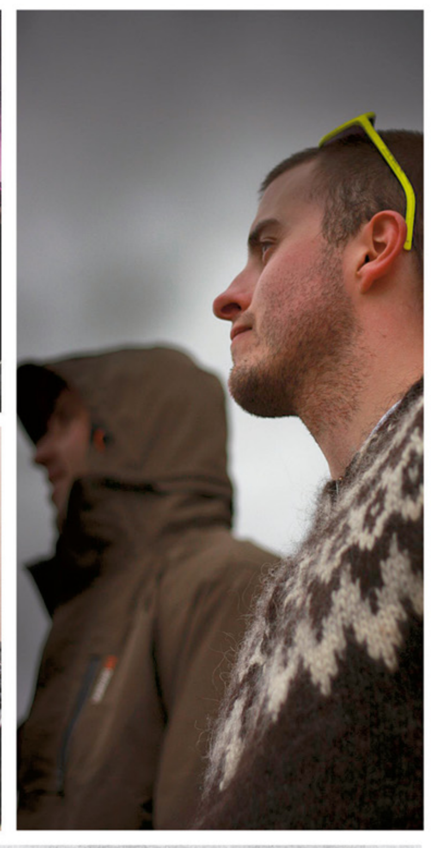
Why be based in Georgia?
MT: We had a San Francisco office for a period in the '90s, but we have always been primarily in the Atlanta area. The state of Georgia particularly, and the city of Atlanta secondarily, have set their sights on becoming a major hub in the videogames industry, and I think pretty intelligently they put their money where their mouth is and have come up with a benefit tax credit package superior to anything else in the country. It's proven to be a good tool in helping game development.
Chris McDonough: There's also a local IGDA chapter that's been very positive. The state has helped to bring in other companies and they've started to consolidate and organise themselves into a group that can communicate and make everyone aware of how many large dev houses there are in Georgia, and many of them are hiring.

Was the transition from pen-and-paper to videogames easy?
MT: Well, there are some similarities and there are some differences. There's an uncommon combination of attitude and talent that works for what we want to do, and that's true for pen-and-paper and it's true in the digital environment. So we have always searched around the world for people who can do what we need them to do. However, the scope, the size of the team required to produce something that's excellent, is orders of magnitude larger for a videogame than it is for a pen-and-paper game. So the volume of good people that we need to find to build up the team is a much larger endeavour and a constant process. Chris spends a noteworthy part of his time sourcing recruiting and meeting people.
CM: It's been going well, though, because the industry has been in a downturn of late, yet CCP continues to grow and we have lots of open positions. We've already, in six months, almost met our recruiting goal for the year. There's a lot of good talent available right now. And the other thing too is that CCP doesn't answer to a publisher. There's just a ton of creative freedom here and a lot of the energy is centred around getting stuff right rather than meeting some arbitrary publisher deadline. You'd be amazed how many people have been in a bad publisher relationship that come here and say, "Wow! I value that more than almost anything else you can offer – the fact that some person who doesn't sit with the team day to day isn't going to come in and ask me to make changes to something that I've been working on for months so we can meet quarterly financials." They really value that and the amount of creative input that people are allowed to have here.














CCP







HI-REZ STUDIOS



After 20 years of dreaming and five years of development, Hi-Rez's Global Agenda is clear



- **NAME:** Hi-Rez Studios
- **LOCATION:** Alpharetta
- **FOUNDED:** 2005
- **EMPLOYEES:** 45
- **URL:** www.hirezstudios.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Global Agenda: Sandstorm*







The studio is home to industry veterans including key contributors to *City Of Heroes*, *Oblivion* and *Call Of Duty*



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Interview: Erez Goren

CEO

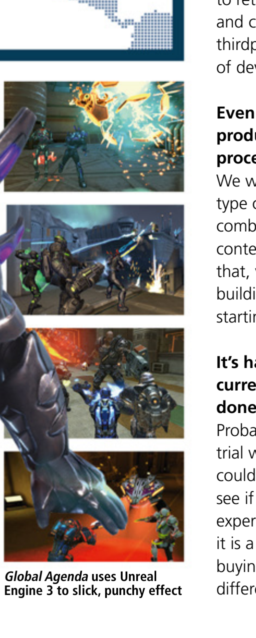
Erez Goren waited over 20 years to return to the industry after the videogame crash in the early '80s put paid to his budding game development career, but a successful stint in retail point-of-sale system development allowed him to return and self-fund his dream game company and create his dream game, *Global Agenda*, a thirdperson shooter MMOG that after five years of development recently launched via Steam.

Even for an MMOG, five years is a fairly long production time. What was the development process for *Global Agenda*?
We worked for a very long time to hash out the type of systems that we wanted – balancing the combat and so on, rather than focusing on creating content. Now, you don't need a really big team for that, what you need is time. So we focused on building those foundations. Really, we're only just starting with our content plans.

It's hard to make an MMOG stand out in the current marketplace. What work have you done to make sure *Global Agenda* is visible?
Probably the most important is that we started a free trial where players could play to a certain level. They could completely play all aspects of the game and see if they enjoy the format. A game that you can experience and then decide if you want to purchase it is a relatively easy entry point compared to just buying it and hoping for the best. And, as we're very different from other MMOs out there, with shooter-style combat and more persistent things in terms of influence over the world via PvP and PvE, giving people a full range of the experience is important.

You're only selling the game through Steam right now – is Valve's platform the ideal distribution method for an MMOG?
Well, Steam is obviously a good path because they do have access to a very large group of PC gamers, but that's not to say that other paths aren't just as valuable; those are ones we are looking at working with right now. You will see us expand into retail outlets and additional distribution channels. However, on Steam the game has done very well. If you look at their MMO listings we've been consistently in the top three in sales.

Is *Global Agenda* the kind of game that is intended to grow and grow, or are you aiming for a particular size of community that you can concentrate on supporting?
I think with any type of MMO you want to maintain a community, but ideally grow it over time. You always want fresh people coming in because there is always a proportion of burnouts. With the type of expansion system we are planning, we expect waves of people who have played it and left to come back to see something fresh and new. However, we don't want that sensation of huge spikes up and down, because that can ruin the feeling of the community. It's not a fixed size of people we're looking for, but we're watching the spikes carefully.



Global Agenda uses Unreal Engine 3 to slick, punchy effect



TM

Southern Interactive Entertainment and Games Expo

OCTOBER 1-3, 2010 -- ATLANTA, GA

WWW.SIEGECON.NET

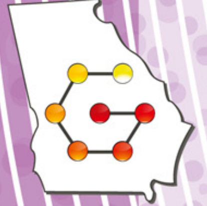
The creator of Pong and founder of Atari,

Nolan Bushnell

will deliver the opening keynote,

“The Best Is Yet to Come.”

4th ANNUAL EVENT



GEORGIA GAME DEVELOPERS ASSOCIATION

Professionals @ Play ™

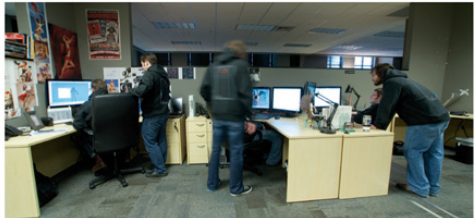


XAVIANT

New to games but with years of experience in software, Xaviant hopes to go big with its debut

- **NAME:** Xaviant
- **LOCATION:** Cumming
- **FOUNDED:** 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 47
- **URL:** www.xaviant.com
- **CURRENT PROJECT:** *Lichdom*





Xaviant has plans to use outsourcing, but right now in-house art staff are building the vision for its first title



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Interview: Michael McMain

CEO

Xaviant CEO **Michael McMain** was originally the CEO of Atlanta-based online gambling platform developer Realtime Gaming, but when that company was moved offshore, he took the 'core' of the local staff "to keep the software platform afloat" until the original company was set up overseas, and then decided to enter the videogame industry. The company is now hard at work on its first gaming project.

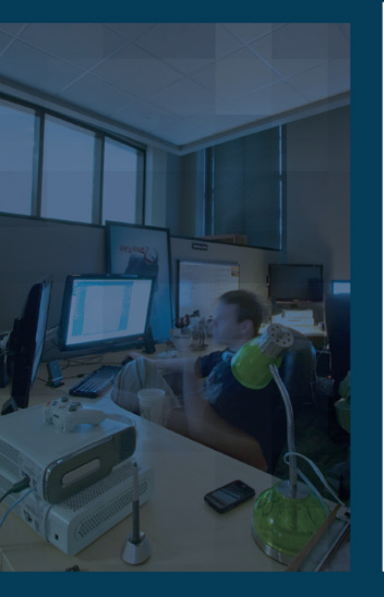
Was it easy to transition from gambling software to videogames?
We've had to round out our team with some core components that were missing – game design, some art; we had some art talent but we need environmental artists and so on. We went through that process and have been focused on executing the vision for our first game.

How challenging was it to staff up?
Very challenging. I'd say the most challenging portion of it for us was hiring a lead game designer. As a team, Xaviant has been together for around 15 years, and most of us have known each other for somewhere between 15 and 20, with a similar level of development experience. So we've been together for a really long time, and know how to create and deliver software. But in software development the development is the focus, whereas in game development the design is the central focus. Yet I didn't have any expertise in that, or ability to assess a game designer's skills. It took us maybe a year making mistakes before we hired the guy we have now, who is phenomenal. He's our lynchpin: when you find a person that's awesome, they tend to know other awesome people. The minute you find someone like that, you should cultivate them for all they know. From that we were able to hire our lead animator, lead environmental artist and other game designers.

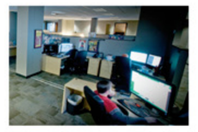
Can you discuss the project?
Well, we don't have a publisher yet. We're in a rare position because we're self-funded, and we can execute the vision, or get far enough along, before we have to involve a publisher or someone who would begin to exert outside pressure.

How far will you go without a publisher?
Well, right now we're still in our conceptualisation phase. We expect to be done with that soon and enter pre-production with the goal of being in full production at the end of the year, expecting a year, year and a half of production. If push came to shove, we could seek a publisher that was very passive, but really the approach we are taking is not just creating a game but a new IP. That's a pretty aggressive thing; we're in talks over a movie deal, looking at doing a graphic novel – we are trying to hit all fronts and my dream is to find a publisher who really wants to partner with us on this, someone who wants to come in and spend the marketing dollars, even co-own the IP. I am totally in line with that.







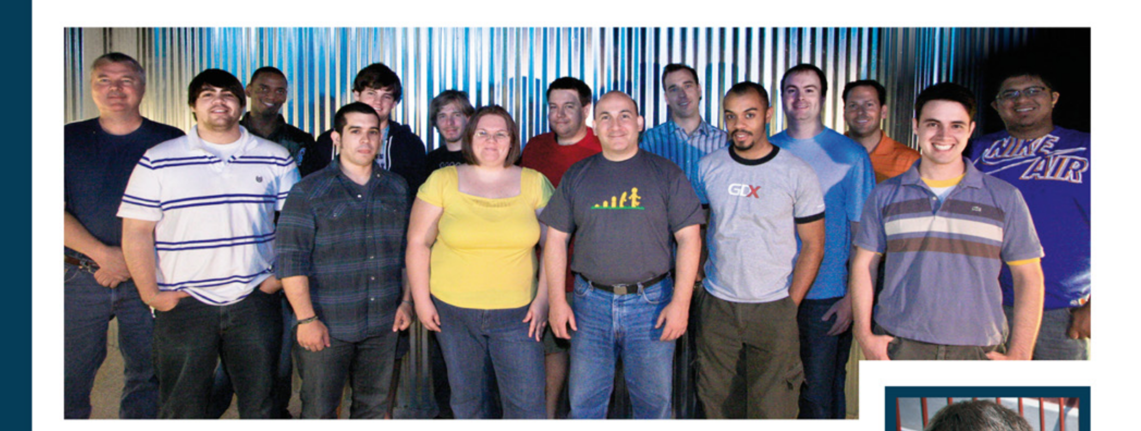


The company's engineering team works with its artists to get the best out of the CryEngine's Sandbox editor



MENUE

An Atlanta developer aiming to conquer the social game space with the power of the Roman Empire



- **NAME:** MENUe
- **LOCATION:** Atlanta
- **FOUNDED:** February 2010
- **EMPLOYEES:** 45
- **URL:** www.romantaxi.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Roman Taxi*



Interview: Ron Williams

Director

The US arm of a Japanese mobile content and digital comic publisher, MENUe is making inroads into the competitive social gaming space beginning with Facebook- and MySpace-enabled title *Roman Taxi*. The company expects to work bringing Japanese social games to the west and vice versa, with three more titles due to follow up the release of *Roman Taxi* within the year.

You're entering the crowded social gaming space – what sets MENUe apart?
We think that what the leading guys out there have done right is simplified the play to really appeal to a broad audience. But we think that can be improved on by actually bringing a little more fun into the mix, while still trying to keep it simple. I mean, most of the really successful social games out there today are really 'work' experiences rather than play experiences. In order to do that, you really have to increase your production budgets to bring the more fun elements in. So *Roman Taxi* is going to have a lot more animation than some of the more successful games have seen, in terms of scenes that engage and attempt to entertain the user. It's not just moving a character around the screen doing things, there's a lot of interactive elements that happen that we think will be new to this space.

Does it follow the trend of asynchronous play that social games tend toward?
Oh, no, this definitely more realtime play. It's single-click play, but it requires constant user engagement from the point where you log in until you log off. We will probably include some elements that have a time-based requirement; certainly your character's energy recharges while you're not playing, but it's not a 'growing' game. *Roman Taxi* is centred on events that happen to the player, rather than waiting for the things to happen.

How are you looking at monetising your games?
We haven't locked down the whole motivation strategy just yet. We know the core areas and have experience in monetising gamers from past businesses, but for *Roman Taxi* it really centres on expanding the content available to the user and vanity stuff such as character and vehicle customisation that they can show off to their friends. But hopefully pulling the 'surprise lever' in people's heads, you know where they're like: "Wow, I wasn't expecting that, that was cool."

That's a proven model, but don't you think these models tend to feed the smaller group of dedicated players rather than the larger audience of casual players?
Yeah, and that's across the free-to-play space. It's interesting, we have quite a bit of experience in the MMORPG space but the social space has its own challenges. People spend most when they're engaged, but it's hard to engage someone in five minutes, so the monetisation percentage is much, much smaller in the social space. But part of it we think is production quality. There's still a chance to build more engaging experiences that will even hook the casual player.



As an ancient Roman cabbie, ***Roman Taxi*** **sees you carrying fares to get larger, better taxis**

University profile

SOUTHERN POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY

A State University that makes a good case for game dev courses as a benefit to Georgia

SPSU Games

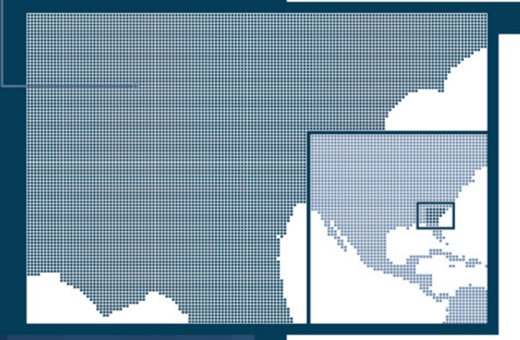
- **NAME:** Southern Polytechnic State University
- **LOCATION:** Marietta
- **FOUNDED:** 1948
- **STUDENTS:** 5,000+
- **URL:** www.spsu.edu
- **COURSE:** Bachelor of Science in Computer Game Design and Development





Southern Polytechnic State University has a unique, state-wide mission to offer bachelors and masters degrees and continuing professional development in science, engineering, technology, and related fields







Students on SPSU's game design course gain significant studio experience in their senior year



Interview: Jon A Preston

Professor

As part of Georgia's state university system, Southern Polytechnic State University offers a Bachelor of Science in Computer Game Design and Development with a lower barrier for entry than many game courses, with lower tuition fees than private universities and scholarships available to students who maintain a certain grade point average in their academic career, something that the university hopes will increase diversity with the wider game industry as well as within the local Georgia videogame development community.

Was this course created to create game programmers, or is it broader than that?
Before we put the programme together we did a survey throughout the US and internationally and found about three dozen universities, what they were doing, and plotted them on an axis: how much art, how much game design, how much programming. We found it to be about 60 to 70 per cent weighted towards programming, so we put in a little bit of design, a little bit of art, but created a course primarily about development and programming. We bring in the artistic side in more through the non-majors. We have technical communication and media arts departments that can create assets, and we've designed the courses so they're flexible and students can work alongside each other. However, we also have events they can do outside of class; students need to have exposure and practice working with teams, so we run game jams involving other universities around the Atlanta metro area.

Do you include traditional computing courses?
We start off with foundational courses like Computer Science and Data Structures, but we have added a gaming flavour to them; they're learning the core elements of program development but via sprite manipulation rather than printing numbers to the screen.

Is it a challenge to create a fully featured game-focused course in a state university?
The administration has really left it to the faculty, but there is oversight, of course. We use the IGDA standards for our curriculum to legitimise the decisions that we've made, and we make sure to stay current with games conferences and so on, but we haven't faced a lot of red tape. There's been no push-back on what the faculty has chosen – for example, we're using XNA and C# rather than a traditional language like Java.

How have you found XNA as a teaching tool?
The students have really enjoyed it. There's a large body of work on motivating students through media and it gets it right, as you can play sounds or put graphics onscreen with just a few lines of code. What's interesting is that students, after a few courses, compared to the students taking Java, feel like they can't do as much. But really the Java students start from scratch and think they're doing 'more' programming, whereas the C# students are more humbled by the scope of software projects, seeing the grander scope and putting their piece into it, which I think is much more authentic to real software development.



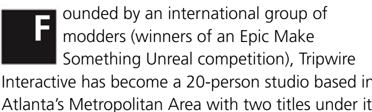
TRIPWIRE INTERACTIVE

A group of modders who orchestrated a contest success into a Steam phenomenon



Interview: John Gibson

President



Founded by an international group of modders (winners of an Epic Make Something Unreal competition), Tripwire Interactive has become a 20-person studio based in Atlanta's Metropolitan Area with two titles under its belt – *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45* and *Killing Floor.* It's a refreshing success story in PC-only development, and is now working on a follow-up to that first title, entitled *Red Orchestra: Heroes Of Stalingrad*.



The Tripwire Interactive team is remaining loyal to its industry bump-starter by using Unreal Engine 3 for its upcoming sequel

How is it that the company came to be based in Atlanta?
After we won the Make Something Unreal competition [in 2004 with *Unreal Tournament 2004* mod *Red Orchestra: Combined Arms*], our big goal was to make a commercial version of *Red Orchestra*. To do that we had to form a company and create an office. As we had people all across the world, we could have been based anywhere, and so our plan was somewhere where the weather was decent and the cost of living was good. It's funny but my wife was the one who nudged me to choose Atlanta, as her family was from here.

It's said you owe a lot of your success to selling your games via Steam.
When we were working on the retail version of *Red Orchestra* we had a really hard time trying to get it into stores. We were getting offered some really heinous deals: "We'll take your IP rights; you have to sell a certain amount of sales before you get anything back…" We were at the end of a rope thinking we made a game and could have no way of selling it to people. This was before Steam was selling other people's games, but I had this crazy idea of contacting them and asking them if they would sell it. To my surprise, we got a call back!

We were the third game on Steam that wasn't from Valve. Valve had estimated we'd sell X amount of units in the lifetime of the product – I won't say what X is! But in the first week we shifted ten times that amount. *Red Orchestra* helped prove to Valve that Steam was going to be successful selling other people's games, which was good for both of us.

- **NAME:** Tripwire Interactive
- **LOCATION:** Roswell
- **FOUNDED:** 2005
- **EMPLOYEES:** 20
- **URL:** www.tripwireinteractive.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45, Killing Floor*



ENTERTAINMENT ARTS RESEARCH INC

An Atlanta-based publisher and developer with faith in a game industry with increased diversity

Interview: Joseph Saulter

Senior VP and founder

Unusual within the industry, Entertainment Arts Research is dedicated to "expanding the racial, cultural and ethnic identification of game characters, artwork, stories and literary vision of minorities" within videogames, with the aim of leading the development of videogames that serve the African-American, Latin American and Caribbean markets, beginning with *Universe Of Faith*, an online virtual world with religious themes.



The EARI board. Back row: Renee Graham, Greg Hostelley, Myrner Gale. Front row: Joseph Saulter, Dave Hostelley, Jonathan Eubanks

Can you sum up EARI?
We hope to create, develop and publish videogames, web content and interactive entertainment that reflect the culture, ethnicity and passion of communities the mainstream media overlook, creating space for a wide range of expression and entertainment from soulful explorations of faith to the music and energy of the urban scene.

Is a diverse development community important?
Very important. We strive to help the industry find talent outside mainstream developers, that can ignite new cultural experience and create fresh content. We really want to position ourself to give a voice and tell the story of a diverse community of innovators.

What's *Universe Of Faith*?
Universe Of Faith is an online virtual world for people of faith around the world. Players will be able to join in live, public debates, hang out at cafes or shop in virtual stores. They even get their own apartment in which they can share personal photos or videos with friends, and there are rich, 3D churches where players can watch sermons.

How has Georgia benefited you?
I've been an educator for over 30 years, and I realise the importance of an educational arena where highly skilled educators teach highly motivated and creative students, and Georgia has a wealth of that talent and a government that is specifically working towards enhancing the videogames community.

From your perspective, is Georgia a good place to develop games?
Georgia is a great place to develop videogames.



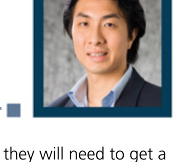
- **NAME:** Entertainment Arts Research Inc
- **LOCATION:** Atlanta
- **FOUNDED:** 2003
- **EMPLOYEES:** 50
- **URL:** www.earigames.com
- **CURRENT PROJECT:** *Universe Of Faith*

University profile

SCAD
The University for Creative Careers

SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

The pen is as mighty as the computer terminal for students at Atlanta's leading art and design college



Interview: Tony Tseng

Professor

With locations in Lacoste, France and Hong Kong, campuses in Atlanta and Savannah as well as the option to e-learn, it might be hard to consider Savannah College of Art and Design a specific positive within the Georgia region. However, the Atlanta campus we visited offered two beautiful new buildings – one in the process of being purpose-built for the digital media courses – full of art and stocked with tools that could only serve to inspire its students.

The Savannah College of Art and Design exists to prepare talented students for professional careers, emphasising learning through individual attention in a positively oriented university environment

How long has SCAD been running game courses?
Our Major is relatively new, but we keep improving every year, and there is always potential for our faculty to develop new classes. Every member of the faculty has their own specialty and the school encourages them to explore new technology. For example, I'd been working on augmented reality research for the past year and a half and I was able to apply my research to open some new classes about augmented reality games.

Do you create students who can immediately slot into roles?
We educate, we don't train labourers; we want to show them more of a complete picture of the games industry. At the same time, I wanted students to be realistic, so we have classes that focus on specifics, like character design or animation – techniques that they will need to get a particular job. However, the picture has completely changed in the past couple of years. As much as there is always a need for specific talents, there are a lot of independent studios and game artists and designers, and if you choose to go independent you need to know everything. We try to cover everything here to provide a student with options.

SCAD prides itself on the fundamentals – the printing course starts with letterpress training – are the game courses the same?
We start with pen and paper, not the computer. I think the idea of the design is more important than the tools you use to create it, so in class I can start with everyday objects; sometimes we use chairs or stationery. I could give a student three pencils and three erasers and ask them to create a game.

- **NAME:** Savannah College of Art and Design
- **LOCATION:** Savannah,
- **FOUNDED:** 1978
- **STUDENTS:** 11,000+
- **URL:** www.scad.edu
- **SELECTED COURSE:** Interactive Design and Game Development

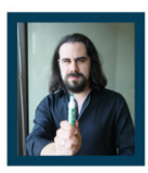
University profile



Georgia Institute of Technology

GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Though it doesn't offer a specific gaming course, Georgia Tech promises a well-rounded education



Interview: Ian Bogost

Professor

The Georgia Institute of Technology, better known as Georgia Tech, is unusual in that it doesn't offer a specific computer gaming degree, instead choosing to offer a range of degrees that include game development, such as the Computer Science course or the Computational Media and Human-Centered Computing courses. And, like Southern Polytechnic State University, the Institute is part of the Georgia state university system.



The Georgia Institute of Technology is one of the US's top research universities. Its campus occupies 400 acres in the heart of the city of Atlanta, with over 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students

Why doesn't Georgia Tech offer a specific game development course?
This is deliberate: game development is complex and requires well-rounded graduates. I teach primarily in the BS in Computational Media and the MS/PhD in Digital Media, but the point is, you can come at gaming in a lot of ways at Georgia Tech, from an integrated game design/criticism approach, to an engineering approach, to a usage and effects perspective. Within these degrees there are courses that relate to games. Some deal very generally with, say, the idea of using computational media for expressive purposes; some deal with game design and analysis; some deal with game engineering and AI; and some deal with history.

Then what sets Georgia Tech's offerings apart?
This is a world-class engineering school with a deep and growing commitment to the liberal arts. There are very few other places where you can find that.

Students don't come to Georgia Tech for a vocational education. They come to get a grounding in a field that will last them their careers. We want our students to challenge the industry they enter, not just to serve it. We're not after 'just jobs' – although we also work hard to place our students. We want them to set the tone for their generations in their fields.

Do you see graduates building startup studios in Georgia like, say, thatgamecompany?
Thatgamecompany was set up originally inside Sony's Santa Monica studio. One of the arguments for drawing more, bigger publishers and developers to the state is to seed situations like that. And Georgia's economic incentives are certainly poised to do that.

- **NAME:** Georgia Institute of Technology
- **LOCATION:** Atlanta
- **FOUNDED:** 1885
- **STUDENTS:** 20,000+
- **URL:** www.gatech.edu
- **SELECTED COURSES:** Computational Media, Computer Science, Human-Centered Computing



ROCKET SLIME



TIME EXTEND

DRAGON QUEST HEROES: ROCKET SLIME

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **TOSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**



How Square Enix used grinning tanks and a cast of 100 to bring new life to an old world – and wring order from chaos in the process

Handheld consoles have a peculiar power: the power to bring out the best or the worst in developers. While many teams blunder, either by engaging in quixotic struggles to cram existing templates into a smaller space, or by simply sidling on to the new hardware trailing clouds of lethargy and minigames, there are a brave few who see the shift in tech as a chance to shift direction too. Rather than retread or rehash, they instead offer asides to their main franchises that don't only play to the latest platform's strengths, but can shed a completely new light on the source material at the same time.

It's ironic, perhaps, that *Dragon Quest* should be the series that typifies this approach most completely. The world of a roleplaying game fills up quickly, with characters, certainly, but also with conventions, and RPGs don't get a lot more conventional than Yuji Hori's decade-spanning opus [see **E**217 for more on the series]. The monolithic Japanese fantasy series has been criss-crossing the same territory since 1986, and while *Dragon Quest* has always offered its players great stories, it has tended to take a fairly cautious approach to its mechanics. *Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime*, however, was a complete reversal of all that. As the series burst on to the DS for the first time, in a game developed by Japan's enigmatic TOSE team (a collection of backroom boys whose best work often goes uncredited), story was kept to an absolute minimum while mechanics were encouraged to warp and mutate gloriously, bubbling forth in unexpected torrents.

The result was a slight game, certainly, but one that utterly defies genre. *Rocket Slime* isn't just one of the most playful of DS titles, it's also one of the hardest to classify – and that's saying something when you're talking about a handheld device that's given us Euro-art dating sims, point-and-click driving tutors and a game about learning to get the absolute most from your own facial expressions. And yet even as *Rocket Slime* blends play styles – some familiar, some newly minted – it manages to make its baffling levels of ingenuity seem entirely natural. It switches speeds without ever seeming clumsily paced, and fits dizzying levels of complexity in alongside minigames about sweeping up leaves. It dazzles without baffling, and brings a wealth of new ideas to one of gaming's most venerable licences. How does it do it?

Not by reining in its ambitions or firing you through an endless chicane of tutorials. Rather, *Rocket Slime* begins with fireworks, both celebratory and then metaphorical, as Boingburg, the sleepy capital city of Slimenia, is invaded by the villainous Plob. As the names suggest, what follows is not the most high-minded of adventures – particularly for anyone expecting the heft and drama of a traditional *Dragon Quest* narrative – but the game's glib approach to scene-setting quietly does the job all the same, and you're left with a relatively traditional agenda lurking behind the pratfalls, puns and oddball characters: repair the kingdom and rescue your friends.

Rocket Slime manages to make its baffling levels of ingenuity seem entirely natural. It fits dizzying levels of complexity in alongside minigames

And, granted, at first *Rocket Slime* seems traditional in more than just its narrative. At its simplest level, TOSE's game is a pared-down take on *Castlevania*, as your search for Rocket's kidnapped allies leads you through a range of simple, themed environments. You'll gain new powers along the way that allow you to unlock different parts of the map, and the landscapes you pass through hardly push at the boundaries of established adventure game backdrops,



TANKS A LOT

Much of *Rocket Slime*'s charm lies with the mechanised wonders rumbling towards you over the crest of every hill, and the game's tank armada is a testament to smart localisation as much as brilliant vehicle design. Naming a giant metal tree after a JRPG classic may be pretty simple stuff, but Square Enix's gift for puns almost never stops giving, with the likes of Fort Knight, Daemolition Man and even intertextual flourishes like DQ: Swordz following you out into the arena. The visuals hit an unexpected sweet spot lurking midway between Robot Wars and Pokémon, and, for the thoroughly committed, there's a decent tournament mode waiting beyond the end credits of the main campaign.



taking in a maze-like forest complete with wooden forts, wells and a craggy-faced tree for a boss, to deserts where conveyor belts of sand whisk you unpredictably away from the beaten track, and the rocky peaks of Mount Krakatoa, with its secret gullies and snow-capped summit.

Even here, though, there's a sense of careful refinement throughout, as if the developer is preparing you for the twists ahead by ensuring that even the simplest of mechanics are as intuitive as possible. Off-the-map exploration is always rewarded with a treat of some kind – and almost always drops you off where you need to be afterwards, with side-paths forming elegant ox-bow structures that all but excise backtracking – while chunky barriers litter the area, leaving no ambiguity as to the locations you aren't powerful enough to visit yet – or the delights that will await you there when you're ready for them.

And there's already an interesting mixture of ideas going on in these early stages, too, as the game offers you the option to gather random objects – and enemies – as you explore, and dump them into the networks of mine-carts that whiz through each environment on rickety little tracks, headed back towards home. Riding the rails is a means of providing an easy exit from any level when you need it, of course (an unusually thoughtful consideration for a game you might be playing between bus stops), but it's much more besides. The collection gene lies deep within the DNA of most RPG players, and endless scavenging is a compelling little piece of metagame design, even if you don't yet know why you're squirrelling all this stuff away.



Slimes are an odd bunch, ranging from the fusty king to the quietly sinister nun. The best will help out in tank battles, and can load cannons or defend against intruders



And, suddenly, it turns out that you've been squirrelling all this stuff away for the tank battles as, after an hour or so of adventuring, you'll find yourself pitched into a series of one-on-one fights against ludicrously decked-out mechanical death machines, whose odd paint jobs and turret placement are matched by charmingly jokey names. Over time, you'll face off against a giant ice-cream-quiffed cat called the Purrsecutor, the cutlery-encrusted Enforker, and a vast hollow tree named, naturally, the Chrono Twigger. They're not simply filling in for the game's bosses, either – they're an entirely separate strand of gameplay threaded into the main quest.

If tank combat is the most surprising of *Rocket Slime*'s sudden shifts in tone, it is also, happily, the most successful, not least because the developer has the reserves of invention and energy to make such an incongruous element feel like a natural fit. Having thrown you the ultimate curve ball, TOSE simply refuses to settle down, piling on the quirks and, in the process, presenting mechanised warfare as it's never been seen before.





Boingburg is small, but it turns out to be a lovely place to rescue – particularly after your fellow slimes help with the tidying up



As with the main *Dragon Quest* adventures, a chapel is always a good spot to save your game. Many of the series' traditions and audio cues have made it across



Rocket Slime lets you approach its tank battles in a variety of different ways. You can wear down your foe's armour by blitzing them with the bizarre pieces of ammo – including boulders, empty treasure chests and boomerangs – that have been collected on your journey, or you can go solo, firing yourself into the depths of enemy territory to work through the rival tank's interior before destroying the beating heart of its engine. There's no mystery to how things work – no menus and corner-cutting to make the action more abstract – and the business of waiting for random armaments to shoot down the chute for you to then load it into one of the cannons brings a multi-tasking flourish of *Diner Dash* to what is already an entirely untraditional take on the RTS base-rush.

Later on, you'll be able to upgrade your own Schleiman Tank and choose a crew loadout of teammates from rescued townsfolk, juggling a handful of different strengths and weaknesses. Assigning them specific roles on board leaves you better placed to focus on the rock-paper-scissors dynamic of cannon combat as you work out if an Irritaball is any good against a Kaboomamite, and whether anything at all can take down a speeding Hero Sword. By then, of course, you'll be prepared for the next twist in this restless game's agenda, and the one after that.

Yet if *Rocket Slime*'s a riot of new ideas, it's held together by a much older style of craftsmanship. Leapfrogging between exploration and brawling, resource management, boss battles and tank combat, TOSE's game should, by all rights, be a stodgy disaster. Luckily, its careful sense of progression – learnt, perhaps, during the developer's many anonymous RPG ports – ensures that Rocket's knockabout journey manages to keep its players facing in the right direction no matter how many times the game's peculiar sense of adventure tries to spin them around.

As RPGs become mired in tradition, it's the oddities like Rocket Slime that will grow irresistible to players and designers alike

And so everything in Rocket's world moves outwards and onwards with a simple grace, from exploration that opens up with each bouncy, springy new skill, through basic resources that can be combined to create bigger and better items, and on to tank battles that see you steadily enhancing your standard Schleiman model until, in the game's final moments, you can literally take it into the sky. The real spine of the adventure, however, lies back home in Boingburg, as your rescued friends form a tangible completion meter, the cold abstraction of percentages replaced with 100 bubbly little idiots to rescue, all with their own foibles and stylish accoutrements, and all of whom are itching to send you a letter of thanks when you're done.

As RPGs become thoroughly mired in tradition, and as the fans of the great series continue to ask for the same great stories retold again and again, it's the oddities and offshoots like *Rocket Slime* – a slight, fascinating and in some ways important game – that will grow increasingly irresistible to players and designers alike. In TOSE's case, the opportunity to explore unmapped territory within a classic franchise resulted in something that feels like a designer's scrapbook as much as a game: an adventure built from a few major new concepts, and dozens of scribbled embellishments. If you want invention along with drama, and quirkiness to go with your quests, then the place to seek it out may no longer be the conservative epic unfolding on the TV screen, but the spry little charmer that lives inside your handheld.



SECOND SLIME AROUND

***Rocket Slime*'s not TOSE's earliest *Dragon Quest* spin-off, with the first game in the series, subtitled *Ballistic Tails Brigade*, touching down on the GBA in Japan in 2003. While it remains unreleased in the west, its story is largely identical to the sequel, as a single slime undertakes a dangerous quest to free his friends from kidnappers. *Ballistic Tails Brigade* may not have featured *Rocket Slime*'s tank combat, but it is the first sighting of the DS game's distinctive inventory system, as you carry objects around by balancing them on your head.**



THE MAKING OF…
TUNNEL B1

Neon's tough-as-nails vehicular shooter wasn't created with tunnel vision, but a total lack of it

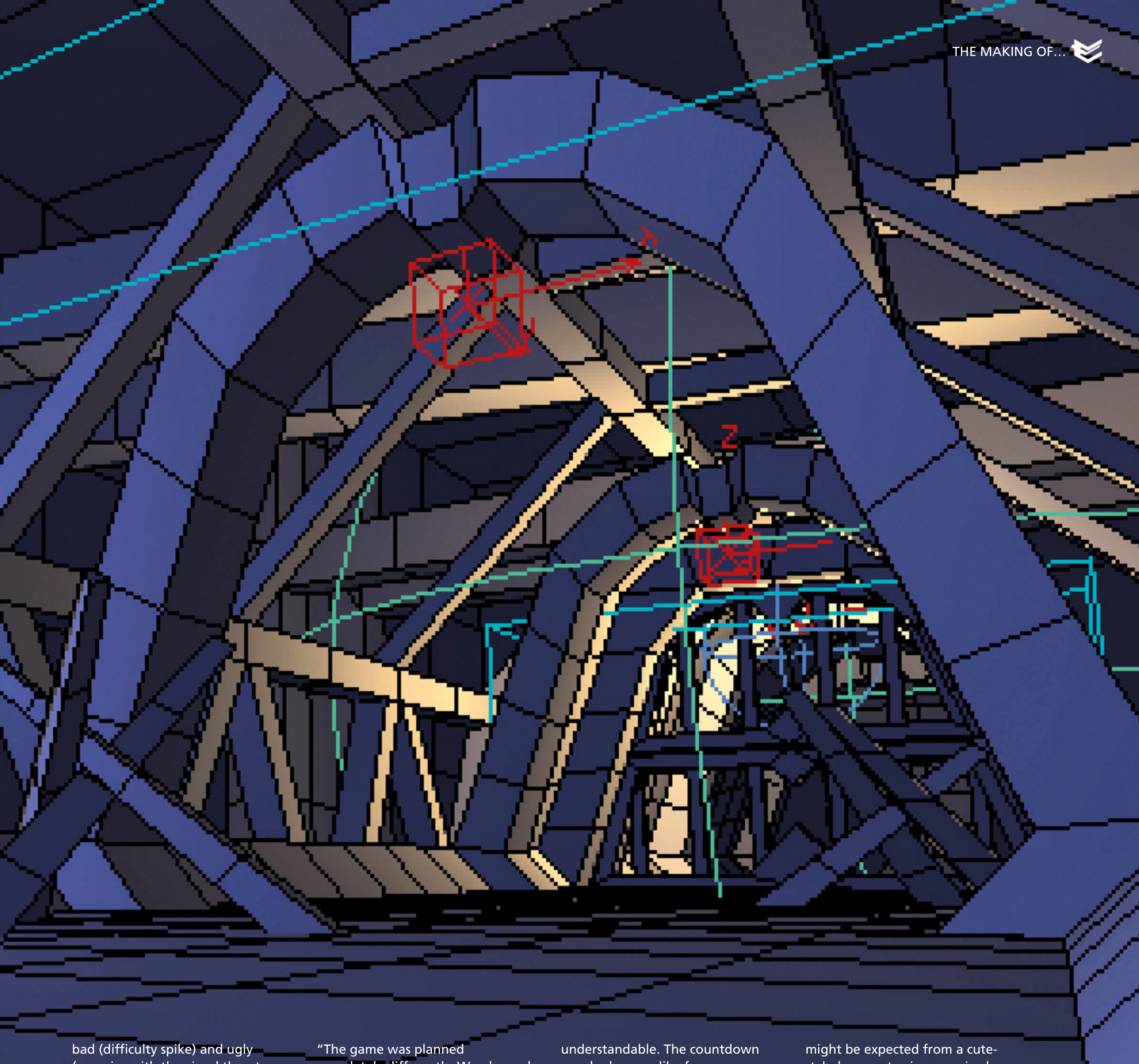
FORMAT: **PS1, SATURN** PUBLISHER: **OCEAN** DEVELOPER: **NEON** ORIGIN: **GERMANY** RELEASE: **1996**

For the videogame industry, 1996 was a good time. With the PlayStation hardware two years old in Japan, and hitting its stride in the west with a wealth of thirdparty support, Sony pixels were on televisions worldwide. By June, there would be a price cut for the console that would plant it atop the hardware charts, but the deal was sealed by games. And for games, 1996 was a very good year.

It was the year that genres were being reborn and redefined in the living room. The third dimension was a revolution of form rather than a seismic shift in content. We were playing the same types of game: racing (*Ridge Racer*, *Wipeout*), platformers (*Tomb Raider*, *Crash Bandicoot*) and beat 'em ups (*Tekken*, *Battle Arena Toshinden*), but with a new palette and perspective. And on a canvas of titles dedicated to single pillars of design, *Tunnel B1* is an oddity.

With its rat's-eye view, weapon-free HUD and top-mounted guns, German developer Neon concocted a videogame blend that many critics spat out in disgust. Gameplay consists of drifting and shooting your way through barriers and drones as you race against the clock. Those levels are cut-and-paste morgues of brown and grey, distinct only in their yellow/black caution arrows and fluorescent lights that signify a wafer-thin apocalyptic narrative (supported only by a textless opening cutscene).

You'll find *Tunnel B1* listed as a firstperson shooter, a 'vehicle shooter' and any number of expletives if you cast your eye over the internet. It's not surprising to find such mixed reception and memories for a title so polarised in its content. Good (framerate),



bad (difficulty spike) and ugly (enemies with the visual threat of a wheelie bin): *Tunnel B1* still effervesces with love and hate in the murky waters of nostalgia.

But this isn't really about what *Tunnel B1* was – the interesting question is what such a mishmash was ever meant to be. The truth is that the *Tunnel B1* that was released was a shadow of the original pitch, as programmer and designer **Jan Joeckel** remembers: "The game was planned completely differently. We planned an action movie-style game with realtime sequences. For demo purposes we made two sections: one where you used a helicopter, and one with the hovercraft. [Ocean] really liked them so they amended the contract and we were going to make 'Game B1' and 'Game B2'." In light of this, *Tunnel B1*'s relentless, time-based demands on the user are more understandable. The countdown wracked nerves like few games before or since, and when viewed as an interlude, a time-attack slice of an all-encompassing gameplay pie, its short loops of satisfaction and pain, risk and reward make more sense.

Experimentation was in Neon's blood, its entry in the *Mr Nutz* series – *Hoppin' Mad*, released as an Amiga title in 1994 – a more freeform spin on platforming than might be expected from a cute-styled game starring a squirrel. Progress in *Hoppin' Mad* played out more like a roleplaying game in 2D and was the progenitor of Neon's unconventional approach to genre that would resurface in the *Tunnel B1* design pitch.

Anthony Christoulakis, another programmer and designer on the project, also recalls the original, epic vision for *B1*: "When we started we had a movie



It's ironic that a game with such a long script ended up being all about action. The opening cinematic hints at a story that was never told







With little prior experience, and propelled by the '90s gaming boom, Joeckel (left) and Christoulakis were at the heart of a group flying by the seats of their pants throughout *Tunnel B1*'s production

ALL PUBLICITY IS GOOD PUBLICITY

Christoulakis recalls the pivotal review that led to Neon's dark trip into the future: "*Mr Nutz* was born of a hobby project – we were working from home – and we pitched to Ocean who picked it up, We were trying to pitch another *Mr Nutz* game to Ocean – *Mr Nutz In 3D* – because we'd heard PlayStation was coming. We were meeting them and brought a rough outline, but unfortunately Ocean wanted something fresh for PlayStation so it was a pass. Fortunately, we got a good review in an Amiga magazine for *Mr Nutz* – something like 90 per cent – so we went to Sony, curious to see PlayStation, and at first they were cautious but after they saw the review they invited us over."

It was a demonstration of Sony's new hardware, showing off its realtime lighting and assorted other effects, that infused Neon with the passion to step up to a project of *Tunnel B1*'s ambition.



scriptwriter help us flesh out the story. We had an 80-page script. It was a dark future setting, an escape from a city and a prison complex. When Ocean wanted two games we decided to focus on the action. We had two games made out of one. Rather than say [*Tunnel B1*] was planned in terms of design, I'd say it was mutating as we went along."

An example of hybridisation was *Tunnel B1*'s control scheme, summed up in **Edge** 37 as "*Descent*-meets-*Wipeout*". The mapping of a crucial strafe function to the D-pad, rather than the shoulder buttons, made manoeuvring your craft rather less than convenient. Joeckel blames this on the fact that few people actually got to test the title before release: "The concept of target-group testing was not so much known at the time. You really have to learn the game and the controls before you can have fun."

Christoulakis humbly puts the problem down to complacency: "We were just getting too used to our own controls and not realising people would have real trouble picking it up. Nobody realised it was far too complex. If we did another game we would certainly make it much more accessible. We realised after release people were having real trouble with it. At that point there were no analogue sticks so there was a problem making a high-speed FPS."

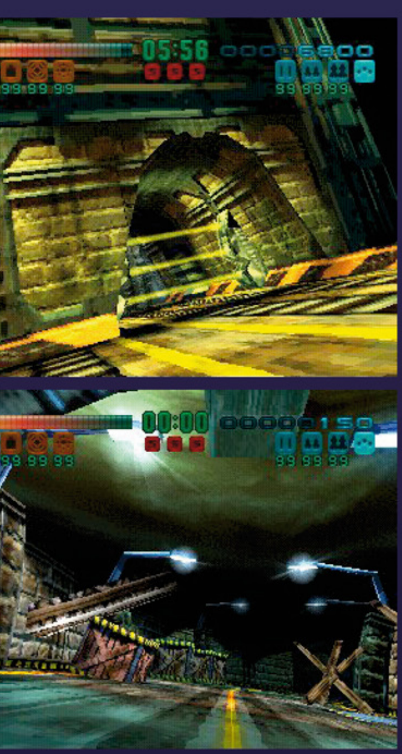
"We got too used to our own controls and not realising people would have trouble picking it up. Nobody realised it was far too complex"

Hardware issues were another obstacle. A particularly sobering moment came with the arrival of actual PlayStation devkits. "When we first got our devkits for PS1 we had very high projections for the processing power," says Joeckel. "Then we found out we could only display very few polygons and 3D objects." The solution was less than conventional, and partly a happy accident as Christoulakis experimented with the new architecture: "Sony was releasing libraries back then for PS1, so we didn't have access to the GPU. We weren't very happy with the overall performance – somehow we found out how to access some functions in the libraries that weren't in the documentation. Maybe they were just available in Japan or for technical testing, but they ran much faster, they had a big impact on the memory footprint. We decided just to use them and not care about Sony's standards at the time."

Having sidestepped hardware woes, the finished *Tunnel B1* turned out to be one of the most aesthetically pleasing early PlayStation productions. Cries of style over substance were heard



Turrets are one of your main foes in *Tunnel B1*, forcing you to do battle with the tricky controls



Though pre-production and concept art is full of colour, the game itself is a dark, desolate experience with a punishing difficulty curve

above the cacophony of the PR drive, and Christoulakis doesn't shirk them: "Most of the gameplay came together far, far too late and was too shallow. The development was basically too chaotic. There wasn't a clear game design present after the design changed and even before that, it was more of a story, a component design." Those production values really were something, though – particularly the dramatic, orchestral score. It was provided by Chris Hulsbeck, a composer known for his work on the *Turrican* series, and helped to elevate Neon's efforts. On the back of *Wipeout*'s licensed dance music tracks, *Tunnel B1* demonstrated that this new generation of hardware would be a practical, effective home for traditional game musicians, too.

The fragile development of *Tunnel B1*, and its transformation from story-driven gameplay mix to dedicated vehicle actioner, somehow led to a successful release for publisher and licensee, Ocean. It was a worldwide hit, too, the Japanese version – evocatively titled *3D Mission Shooting Finalist* – re-engineered with higher-contrast lighting at the request of publishing execs. "They made a good deal with GaGa Interactive and made all their money back from the Japanese version. They wanted to do another *Tunnel* game," says Joeckel. So enthusiastic was the publisher that a UK office was opened by Neon under Ocean's encouragement, as Christoulakis explains: "When Ocean cleared the sequel we opened up a new office in Manchester. We were also working on the prototype for a Nintendo 64 action game." It wasn't to be for Neon, however, due to complications regarding Ocean's finance and some miscommunication with an increasingly anxious Neon regarding royalties. "The problem arose when Ocean had some financial troubles at the end," Christoulakis says. "Things got quite chaotic because they just didn't call us back. It put a lot of pressure on us. We had an exclusive contract with Ocean at the time so we couldn't work with anybody else – even though there were other companies interested in working with us, like Sega, for example." *Tunnel B1*'s sequel eventually made it out of the dark as PlayStation game *Viper*, with production initiated by Neon and completed by an internal team at Ocean.

Neon's journey from Game B1 and B2 to *Tunnel B1* never quite reached the heights – or contrasts – of the leap from Mr Nutz's world of spritely colour and platform hopping to an underground prison complex. The Neon brand eventually eroded and was reborn under the banner of Keen Games with a number of the original *Tunnel B1* team, and the label has continued with an unconventional approach to genre, having dabbled in Game Boy Advance and, most recently, Wii development of everything from BMX to strategy games. What was glowstick-brandishing excitement in **Edge** all those years ago now stands as a forlorn obituary. "Who needs hallucinogenic love drugs when you've got *Tunnel B1*?" asked the preview article. In hindsight, the answer is probably everyone.





New testing territory

A team of researchers is approaching QA from the perspective of something all good videogames have in common – players



Vertical Slice's offices at Sussex University's Innovation Centre

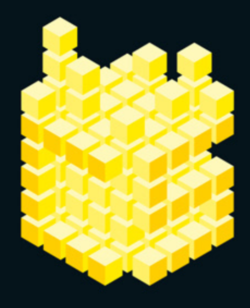
www.verticalslice.co.uk

Testing has traditionally been one of the least glamorous aspects of videogame development. Synonymous with entry-level positions, it's generally viewed as a stepping-stone to a more desirable job in design, art direction, or engineering. Sussex University's Dr **Graham McAllister** would argue that not only is testing underappreciated, it's currently too limited, focusing on debugging the software rather than optimising the player experience. "QA's traditionally only focused on the game itself – whether the code works, whether it crashes or not," he suggests. "We're interested in the player, too: the link with the game. It's something that's still not very well understood."

That's why McAllister and three of his colleagues created Vertical Slice. Formed in 2008 with a grant from Sussex University, Vertical Slice is the country's first bespoke usability testing company, focused on helping development studios get a better understanding of the way players are going to respond to their games. "All of us are from the field of human-computer interaction, which basically means we look at how people use stuff," explains McAllister. "That's very broad – phones, microwaves, anything with a computer chip in it. The four of us, however, were just interested in games. And the most interesting part of games seems to be the gap between what the designers want the player to do, and how people actually use the







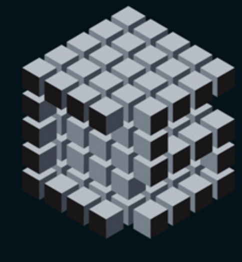


The core Vertical Slice team, from left: Pejman Mirza-Babei (biometrics researcher), Joel Windels (community manager), Dr Graham McAllister (director) and Gareth White (playability researcher)





Blue Toad Murder Files posed the challenge of how to assess usability for a game with a wide audience. The solution was to use more volunteers for gameplay tests



game – those things don't always line up. We thought we could apply what we did and make games better for everybody. The concept is to debug the player's brain in the same way developers can debug code. That's a lofty idea, but it doesn't seem anybody else is doing it."

"There's been a recent trend for play testing, certainly," counters Vertical Slice's playability researcher **Gareth White**, "but we think that's very different from genuine usability testing. What we're offering is this bridge between the industry and academic research discipline: it's a more refined kind of testing. Human-computer interaction uses things from psychology, from biomedical sciences, from in-depth studies of software, and that's something the games industry hasn't traditionally had access to."

McAllister's team takes a biometric approach to testing, fitting volunteers with sensors that measure galvanic skin response (GSR), and tracking their state of anxiety or excitement on a graph while they play. The data is then interpreted during extensive post-game interviews. "The biometric approach gave us a chance to move testing forward," argues McAllister. "It gives us a chance to actually sit people down and get a sense of what's going on in their bodies and in their minds as they play."

It's a system that works across all formats and genres – although the team admits that motion-controlled games where the player's heart rate is already elevated might present problems – but it would be useless without the right sample groups. Fortunately, that's an area in which Vertical Slice's research background gives it an immediate edge.

"We find the players that the developers want," says McAllister. "If it's hardcore gamers they're after, we can get hardcore gamers to play the game and show the developer the kind of responses they're going to get from the experience they're offering. You can control the focus, too: a lot of teams are interested in controller issues, some are interested in difficulty curves, others just want to see how the game is going to react with different audiences. For a recent family game we worked on, we brought in over 60 people, ranging from hardcore gamers to absolute casuals, broke them up into groups of four or so, and could offer the developer a real insight into how their game played with different types of people."

It may sound simple, but it's something developers might struggle to do successfully in-house. "You need a little bit of distance for it to work properly," says White. "We've done a lot to make our testing room pleasant and a bit like home – it's comfortable and a bit messy. The way developers would sometimes try to do testing would be in their own studios, and fans brought in for tests would often be in awe of being in the developer's office and meeting them. There are problems there with interference. It's very important that the test subjects know that we're disinterested, that we didn't make the game."

The team has experienced a steady growth in interest over the past few years, and it's seen them consulting on everything from Relentless' *Blue Toad Murder Files* to games like Black Rock Studios' racers *Pure* and *Split Second: Velocity*. "It's getting better in terms of the point at which developers are coming to us," says McAllister. "Since 2008 part of our job has been going out and educating people about this kind of testing. A lot of our early clients were alpha stage and beyond, but we're getting people coming to us earlier and earlier now. They know the sooner they come, the more changes they can make. Education's still important, though: we need developers to understand that it's not just an ad-hoc play test session. There's much more to what we can do than that."

"The concept is to debug the player's brain in the same way developers can debug code. Nobody else is doing it"

Split Second saw Vertical Slice building on a relationship that had been cemented during the production of Black Rock's previous racer, *Pure*. While Black Rock has its own in-house QA, a detached perspective has delivered valuable feedback



[7]

Number crunching

One of Vertical Slice's more controversial concepts is a potential score prediction service, based on a Master's project that studied Edge reviews. While the plan is currently on hold, it still provides an interesting insight into the efficacy of usability testing. "Broadly speaking, the games that score higher have fewer usability issues," argues McAllister. "What I mean by that is that when we look at reviewers' comments, they talk more about the game and the game design, rather than 'I couldn't do this, I couldn't figure that out'. With games at the lower end of the market – games that score the 5s and 6s – reviewers tend to talk about usability a lot. If you don't get past your usability issues, you're almost putting a cap on the score you're going to get. If you can't sort that out, you're not going to get through to the good stuff."

University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: Leeds Metropolitan University

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 30,000.

URL: www.leedsmet.ac.uk

CONTACT: +44 (0)113 812 0000



KEY STAFF
Professor Christopher Bailey (dean, Faculty of Arts, Environment and Technology), Dr John Blake (associate dean, Faculty of Arts, Environment and Technology), Dr Nick Cope (associate dean, Faculty of Arts, Environment and Technology), Salam Strudwick (subject group leader, Interactive Media Group), Brian Larkman (principal course leader, Creative Connections Masters) Bal Singh (course leader, BSc (Hons) Games Design), Darren Wall (course leader, BSc (Hons) Computer Animation and Special Effects)

KEY ALUMNI
Andrzej Zymouski (game designer, Lionhead Studios), Kim Clarke (assistant producer, Sumo Digital Sheffield), Chris Elliot (junior artist, Travellers Tales Fusion)







Leeds Met gained its university status in 1992 and has two campuses in the Yorkshire city. It can trace its history back to 1824 and the Leeds Mechanics Institute. The work of its game design students (above), however, brings it right up to date





LOCATION:
Leeds, UK

COURSES OFFERED:
BSc (Hons) Games Design; BSc (Hons) Computer Animation & Special Effects; MSc Games Design; MSc Computer Animation Technology

INSIDE VIEW: JOE ROE (STUDYING: GAME DESIGN)



Roe's work at Leeds Met has seen him model faces both fantastical and realistic

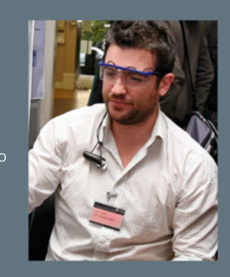
In 2008, **Joe Roe** graduated with a BSc (Hons) Games Design from Leeds Met and this summer graduates with an MSc Games Design.

"I was originally studying computer science in Dublin. Before that, I had been studying Animation and was always quite arty. The game design course seemed to be a good mix of the technical and the creative – I really needed to do something more creative than computer science!

"Throughout my masters I commuted to Leeds from Dublin every Wednesday – it was great being able to still dedicate one day to just going to university. The thing I most valued about the masters course was the freedom you were given – you could do pretty much anything you wanted if you could justify it to the tutors, and they were always pushing you to do something new and innovative.

"The support from the tutors is great. They were really flexible around my travel and would always respond to any emails, etc, really quickly so I didn't feel isolated, even when back in Ireland.

"The facilities at Leeds Met are excellent – professional-level, really. Having a full motion-capture suite is amazing and the labs are open 24/7, every day of the year."



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

NAME: Gogogic ehf

DATE FOUNDED: 2006

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 32

KEY STAFF: Jónas Antonsson (CEO), Gudmundur Bjargmundsson (CTO), Jón Heidar Thorsteinsson (CMO)



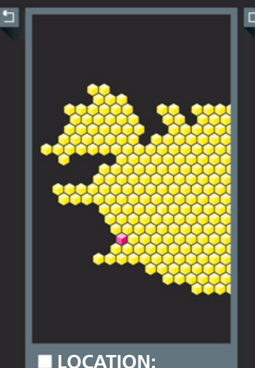
URL: www.gogogic.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Symbol6, *Soft Freak Fiesta*, *Vikings Of Thule*



Vikings Of Thule is an accessible MMOG in which players strive to become Icelandic Viking chiefs





LOCATION:
Reykjavík, Iceland

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Vikings Of Thule expansion and undisclosed social and transmedia projects

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Headquartered in Reykjavík, Iceland, Gogogic ehf was established in 2006 by entrepreneurs who set out to create and introduce a modern breed of game development company. The company has established itself as a serious player in the market with a handful of titles and strong thirdparty relationships under its belt. Success is based on a strong understanding of emerging gaming markets and an ability to harness communities as part of innovative game concepts.

"The founders still hold key positions in the company as drivers of innovation, production, entertainment and operations. Their vision of worlds that follow players wherever they choose to be is a constant beacon, along with their dedication to build a solid brand that stands for strong values.

"The company's mission is to grow and become an exciting, influential provider of innovative and emerging gaming experiences while crossing platforms to enhance each release. It rides the wave of the experience economy and produces immersive multiplatform games aimed at providing gamers with transmedia storytelling.

"Gogogic is built on passion. It stays ahead of the curve by employing highly motivated individuals and nurtures a culture of working hard and playing hard."



Symbol6 is a symbol-matching puzzle game for iPhone and iPod Touch in which you use the touchscreen to move blocks while tilting to defend against red hexagons

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BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING Convergence culture

Part two: The emperor's new clothes

Imagine for a moment an alternate reality where racing games suck. Here, racing games only exist on portable devices. And they don't ever let you actually race. You have a couple of dozen car models, and a few different engines. You can swap out tyres and spoilers, choose from a few different fenders, grilles and lighting packages, change paint jobs and decorate with a handful of decal designs before sharing your cars with friends. In the best of these games your car can race against a friend's car, but remember – no driving. The cars do an automated lap around a plain oval, and a winner is declared.

What I'm describing is not an alternate reality racing game, but rather the actual current state of fashion design games, using racing games in substitution, to illustrate that fashion games are firmly ensconced in a pink ghetto of lifestyle brainwashing gadgets for girls.

> *GTA: Garment District* players would receive meaningful feedback, giving them a sense of what it really feels like to design fashion

Meanwhile, the racing game is among the most important genres in gaming, leading the charge into the future alongside a number of important technological axes including rendering, physics, online capability and user customisation. Why?

Aside from the industry's utterly shameful lack of diversity, the reason that fashion games suck is that the design problems inherent to a good fashion game are harder to solve than those of a racing game.

I believe there are two big challenges to making a great fashion game. The first is the creativity problem. Similar to our bizarro racing game, most fashion games let users mix and match their designs from predefined sets of fabrics, colours and cuts. The game then evaluates 'success' based on proximity to some hidden value set. If the game is looking for [pink] [cotton] [sundress], then a pink silk sundress will be more successful than a pink wool sweater.

The problem is that this is not design in any meaningful sense. It is avatar customisation at best, which is hardly enough to support an entire game, never mind a genre. Unfortunately, designing a freeform editor usable by casual gamers that can generate near infinite variety – and then designing supporting systems that evaluate the impact of the user design on other game systems – is an impressively difficult challenge.

Spore solved it, though, so now we have proof that it can be done. Next?

Next is the context problem. Assembling outfits from a library and sharing them with friends is not fashion design. Fashion needs more than designers. It needs people to wear it, to be influenced by it, to look good – and bad – in it. The context of the interplay of people expressing themselves through their choice of clothes is what fashion is, the same way the context of pushing a car to the limits to complete a lap faster than the other guy is what racing is.

So even if we could theoretically make a *Spore*-like editor for designing clothes that would run on iPhone or DS, how would we provide the necessary context? I believe everything exists to do this today, and I think the game to do it would best be called *Grand Theft Auto: Garment District*.

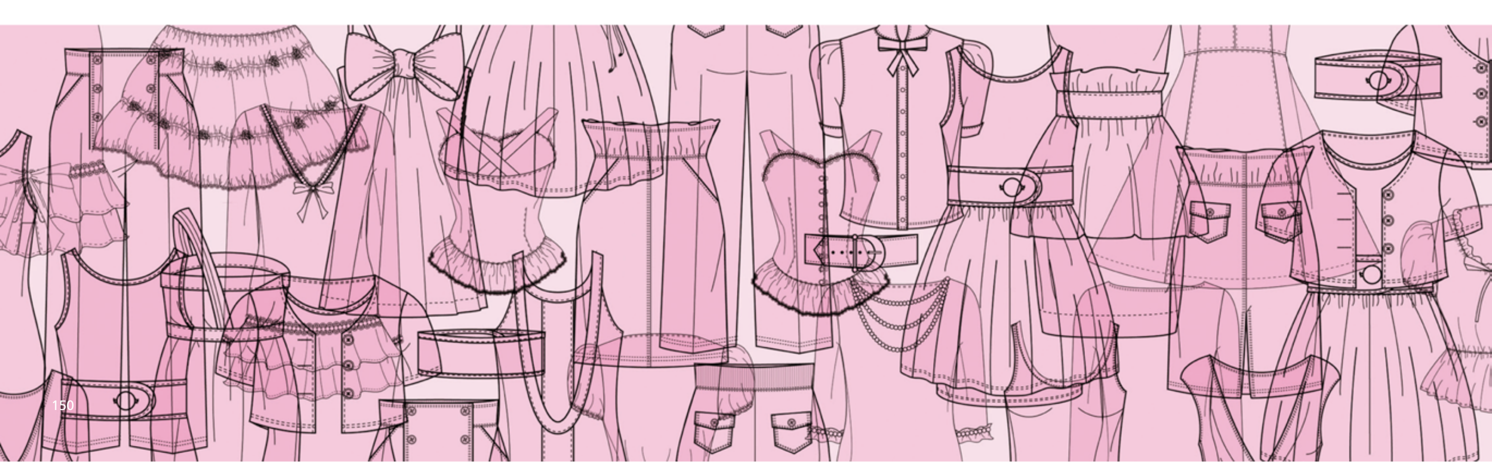
GTA:GD would not only allow you to create any article of clothing you can imagine, it would also allow you – optionally – to design a boutique and to publish that boutique to the cloud. From there, players of *GTA* could subscribe to user-created boutiques to replace the default clothing chains in their game world. These clothes would not only be made available to ten million Niko Bellics, but would seep out into ten million Liberty Cities. The fashion designs of all those designers touching the lives of millions of AI-driven Libertarians.

The popularity of given brands (defined by subscriptions) and given individual styles (defined by aggregated data on what all the Nikos wear) would seed a simple simulation of the cultural evolution of tastes that would determine the outfit of each civilian as he is spawned into the world. Style in any given instance of *GTA* would evolve and change.

Even better, *GTA:GD* players would receive meaningful feedback on their designs. It would give players for whom being a fashion designer is a valuable fantasy a sense of what it really feels like to design fashion, the same way racing games allow us to get a sense of what it feels like to drive a race car.

More importantly, intramedia gaming like this builds connections between people by giving them something they can share across wildly different games. It can dispel a daughter's resentment for a lack of paternal attention, or a father's frustration at the cost of buying her what he knows is a crappy game. It can give them a new way to engage with, and to understand, one another, and in doing so create a new and much-needed context where gaming welcomes and encourages girl gamers instead of cynically exploiting them.

Clint Hocking was creative director of Far Cry 2, *and is now an independent designer. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com*



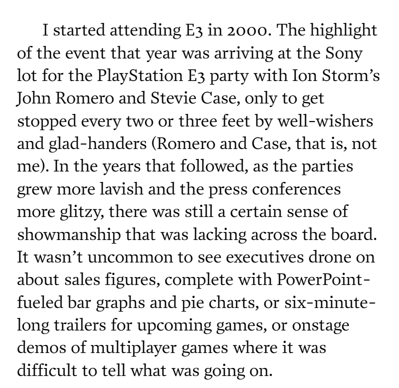
BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

No business like show business

Though the bulk of my career as a journalist was spent covering consumer technology, my bosses at Newsweek were kind enough to let me try my hand at other subjects, namely movies and music. As such, I got to see up close how other entertainment industries present themselves to the world. My most formative such experience was the MTV Video Music Awards, which I attended in 1996 and 1997. It was striking just how inferior the live experience was to the engaging home viewing experience: as an audience member, the stage looked cramped; the show flow had an odd stop-start rhythm, punctuated by the ad breaks; and the entire thing had a palpably airless quality. This was the first time I'd witnessed a made for TV event in person, and having done so, the clichéd phrase that the people at home have "the best seat in the house" finally made sense.

> "At E3, we generally expect to see live demos, so when I saw one of Valve's top men press play on a DVD, I started grumbling"



I started attending E3 in 2000. The highlight of the event that year was arriving at the Sony lot for the PlayStation E3 party with Ion Storm's John Romero and Stevie Case, only to get stopped every two or three feet by well-wishers and glad-handers (Romero and Case, that is, not me). In the years that followed, as the parties grew more lavish and the press conferences more glitzy, there was still a certain sense of showmanship that was lacking across the board. It wasn't uncommon to see executives drone on about sales figures, complete with PowerPoint-fueled bar graphs and pie charts, or six-minute-long trailers for upcoming games, or onstage demos of multiplayer games where it was difficult to tell what was going on.

Fortunately, the advent of televised coverage of conferences like E3 (here in the US it's primarily cable networks like G4 and Spike that have taken the lead) appears to have pushed publishers and platform holders to step up the 'show' half of the show business equation.

When Microsoft revealed during E3 2008 that Netflix streaming video would be coming to Xbox 360, one of its executives made the announcement. This year, to unveil the coming US launch of the ESPN sports network on Xbox 360, Microsoft turned to a pair of ESPN anchors who channelled the product announcement through their inimitable cadences and witty banter, to the amusement of the audience. Nintendo created a memorable stage picture when Reggie Fils-Aime appeared onstage surrounded by a slew of women bearing 3DS handhelds – the only thing missing was a Radio City Rockettes-style kick line. As for Sony, fans of its US 'It Only Does Everything' ad campaign for PlayStation 3 were rewarded with an appearance by the face of that campaign, faux-exec Kevin Butler. He proceeded to take tongue-in-cheek shots at the competition, then deliver a rant on behalf of true gamers who may be feeling left behind by recent industry trends.

This movement towards better showmanship wasn't limited to the system manufacturers. Last year, Electronic Arts was so intent on demonstrating the breadth of its titles that it even included a Charm Girls game. This year, the publisher focused squarely on the E3 crowd with a streamlined presentation of ten games ranging from a 3D trailer for *Crysis 2* to stage demos of *Dead Space* and *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*. By catering to the interests of its actual audience rather than a larger corporate objective, EA's swift, one-title-after-another briefing had a greater cumulative impact than if it had meandered.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Activision turned E3 on its ear, opting out of the seven-figure booths that typify the annual expo in favour of a small set of meeting rooms off the show floor. Instead, the company took over a nearby arena for a concert that featured acts like Usher, Soundgarden, Eminem and Rihanna, showing trailers and game footage for *Call Of Duty: Black Ops*, *Guitar Hero: Warriors Of Rock* and *DJ Hero 2* in between the various artist's sets. The scale of Activision's event was so grandiose, I was surprised that the publisher hadn't lined up a broadcast partner to capitalise on the home audience that would have tuned in to see these acts performing. But as a chest-pounding demonstration of Activision's might, those lucky enough to score a ticket left impressed.

The final example of this trend is also the one I was initially most sceptical of: Valve's decision to show *Portal 2* as a series of videos demonstrating particular aspects of the game. At E3, we generally expect to see live demos, so when I saw one of Valve's top men press play on a DVD, I started grumbling under my breadth. But given the number of people that Valve was trying to accommodate combined with the complexity of the new gameplay mechanics in *Portal 2*, the wisdom of Valve's choice was evident by the time the Q&A portion of the proceedings began (and it didn't hurt that the impeccable writing and voice-acting are yet again laugh-out-loud funny). The lesson? Any of E3's customs can be revamped – as long as it makes for a good show.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Echoshift and friends

It's unfair that a lovingly crafted and aesthetically stylish game should have turned out to be so philosophically depressing. *Echoshift* is a beautiful and clever little puzzler, with its haunting army of shadow puppets and harmonised trilling woodwinds on the soundtrack. But what is disturbing about it is inseparable from its central mechanic, encapsulated in the developers' own cute name for the concept: 'self co-op'.

'Self co-op' is an apt description of the way you must choreograph the actions of your previous selves in gradually iterating a solution to each level (the concept has been seen previously, in arguably purer form, in the Flash game *Click*10*.) Yet the mournful surrealism of 'self co-op' also represents a truth about an atomised, mistrustful society, where the only person you can really trust to cooperate with you is yourself.

> Videogames are the opiate of the people: industrial products of dazzling craft whose function is to keep the masses distracted

In the classic prisoner's dilemma of mid-20th-century game theory, cooperation is for losers: the 'rational' player is expected to betray his co-accused. Subsequently, indeed, neoliberal economics ensconced and somehow naturalised a pessimistic and paranoid conception of the 'rational' actor in society – someone who, by definition, cares only for himself, and views everyone else as at best a pitiless rival and at worst a full-blown enemy.

It is only natural, then, that in a world where loyalty, altruism or empathy are mere sentimental illusions, the notion of cooperation with another person should be reduced to that of a temporary alliance of self-interest and no more (that is the original idea behind the spectacularly ugly coinage 'co-opetition', first recorded in 1913 by the Sealshipt oyster company, trying to reassure its various dealers that they had common cause). Only natural, too, that the solitary individual thus thrown back on his own resources in the jungle of the 'market' should become masturbatorily fascinated by his own abilities for self-advancement, to the exclusion of all else. The term "self-help" (the generic name for a huge industry of exhortation catering to the monstrous egoism encouraged by modern society) already splits the self in two: there is the self to be helped, and the self doing the helping. *Echoshift*'s wry phrase 'self co-op' merely takes this to the next logical stage, where your self can be split into two, or three, or ten, all happily working together in a completely solipsistic universe. We would not be at all surprised to learn of a new inspirational bestseller entitled Cooperate With Yourself!.

But the possibility of real cooperation with another person is, of course, somewhere at the root of our social being. So are my thoughts led from *Echoshift*'s delicate allegory of a modern Everyman as psychic castaway – doomed to trudging repetitively numberless rat-traps of stairs, doors and switches, to no higher purpose than that they are, simply, there – to the possibility of true cooperation in videogames.

Now, to an extent, all competition is cooperative. We cooperate in agreeing to play by the rules of chess, or tennis; we cooperate in keeping score; we cooperate in trying to make it a 'good game' for reasons aesthetic as well as competitive. But playing *against* a friend seems to be becoming less compelling than playing *with* a friend, or so you might assume from the rise of designed-for-co-op games such as *Left 4 Dead*, *Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light* or *Modern Warfare 2*'s Special Ops mode, a far more important and groundbreaking achievement of design than its singleplayer campaign or its polished but unsurprising standard multiplayer. Contrast the unsatisfying 'co-op campaign' of *World At War*, which is hardly co-op at all: rather than having to plan and act as a team, you just both happen to be playing the same level at the same time.

A standard Marxist critique of videogames would say that they are in our age the opiate of the people: industrial products of dazzling craft whose function is to keep the masses hypnotically distracted from their true condition so that they do not act to change it. But to this gloomy analysis one could oppose a more optimistic reading: why cannot games also be training grounds for collective action?

After all, cooperation in a videogame is not somehow less 'real' or authentic merely because the world is imaginary. Blocking out all but the last few Spec Ops missions on Veteran, my friend and I have shot thousands of pretend men in the face, and blown up cars and aeroplanes that were merely gossamer pixel dreams, but the intense camaraderie we felt was as real as any social emotion, and the whole experience far richer than any competitive fragfest. Cooperation, in that sense, is its own reward. Videogames that offer themselves as arenas in which it may flower could help, in their own tiny way, to combat what is so powerfully depicted by *Echoshift*: the isolation that ideology seeks to impose on us all.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

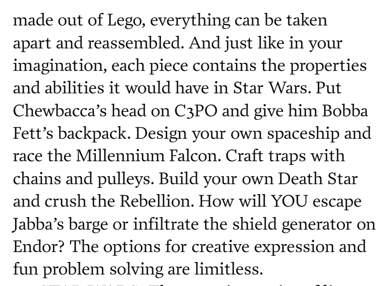
How I would have made Lego Star Wars

BY RANDY SMITH

OPPORTUNITY: Rarely does such an opportunity come along: Star Wars and Lego. Two brands with enormous power, each perfectly aligned with what videogames do best. One embodies the all-time most popular fantasy world of action and adventure. The other instantly evokes the activity of playful creative construction. Here is a game whose design has largely been written for us by the process of these beloved cultural phenomena refining, expanding, and zeroing in on their core appeal over the decades. Not only is it virtually guaranteed to be a huge hit, it will also deliver some of the most intoxicating offerings of our medium to the broadest audience they've ever enjoyed.

HIGH CONCEPT: You play Han Solo, Darth Vader, R2D2, or any of your favourite characters from Star Wars, only you inhabit a colourful, cartoony version of that universe. As a world made out of Lego, everything can be taken apart and reassembled. And just like in your imagination, each piece contains the properties and abilities it would have in Star Wars. Put Chewbacca's head on C3PO and give him Bobba Fett's backpack. Design your own spaceship and race the Millennium Falcon. Craft traps with chains and pulleys. Build your own Death Star and crush the Rebellion. How will YOU escape Jabba's barge or infiltrate the shield generator on Endor? The options for creative expression and fun problem solving are limitless.

> "To bring the joys of expression, authorship and systemic exploration to a new audience, we need to avoid overwhelming with options"



STAR WARS: The game is a series of linear missions drawn from the films – escape from the assault on Hoth, rescue Leia from the Death Star, and so on – where players control a character appropriate to the scene. Thanks to the ubiquity of these stories, players instantly recognise who they are, what their role is, and the structure of the current quest. In addition, the fiction also provides the function of the special Lego blocks: retractable drawbridges, R2's computer interface arm, bones in the Rancor pit, and so on. In short, Star Wars not only contributes a rich fantasy world, it also delivers an audience trained in how it works.

LEGO: If Star Wars is the fiction, Lego is the play. Lego blocks are tools and quest items, collectibles and recipe components, character customisation and deformable world, functionality all provided by the same familiar, refined interface designed into the real-world toys. Not only can characters take them apart and recombine them in realtime during gameplay, these blocks also have simulated properties, meaning that they do what they do in the films. This is truly a Lego set sprung to life. Hoverjets can be used to levitate heavy weights, assuming they are affixed to an appropriate surface. Helmets deflect projectiles. Grappling hooks propel and attach. Cannons fire lasers and can be hooked up to batteries for extra mobility. Gears, levers and hinges can be combined into wholly new constructions, provided appropriate parts can be found. The shape of each block communicates a logical, intuitive constraint about how it can be used. Players will seek out specific blocks, or spawn new ideas from the discovery of an unusual one. The most coveted pieces such as Darth Vader's mask can be obtained only from fallen enemies or harvested from the hardest to reach locations.

DEPTH AND ACCESSIBILITY: Star Wars competes with Lego regarding player clarity. The former hands the player a script telling them exactly what to do, whereas the latter suggests that anything is possible. To bring the joys of expression, authorship and systemic exploration to a new audience, we need to avoid overwhelming with options. We don't want players unable to find the next step of the mission, or floating in space surrounded by the blocks of a decomposed level. The approach is 'depth on demand', meaning that players are invited, but not pushed, into sophisticated systemic interactions. We can borrow from *Zelda* to suggest obvious solutions that keep the player on track: difficult challenges can be neatly solved by the most recent new tool fed to the player. Unlike *Zelda*, using that tool is just a recommendation, and the incredible mutability of the world is a constant enticement to experiment. We expect and welcome that some players will tunnel through walls while others will craft elaborate flying vehicles outfitted with force fields, tentacle arms and severed heads. A *Sims/Spore*-inspired sharing system allows players to educate each other on what's possible by posting their creations on the internet.

COMPETITIVE RESEARCH: Construction games such as *The Incredible Machine* are common enough, but it's rare for this kind of simulation to be positioned in an action world. Examples include *LittleBigPlanet* and the indie web game *Captain Forever* in which the player can bolt together components salvaged from dogfights to craft and customise his spacecraft.

FINAL COMMENTS: This is a done deal. It's way harder than making a button masher with cute cutscenes, but the design was handed to us on a silver platter, and the potential upside is profound. We will all be both rich and heroes.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, *is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch*



Inbox



Issue 217



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: What the advert/back of the box should really say

***Demon's Souls* UK release: Sure, you're complaining it's not been out in the UK for months, but now, here it is – will you actually buy it?**
Sophie

***Half Life 2*: Revolutionary physics and stunningly detailed game world. Apart from, well, obviously no one man could lug all those guns around could they? I mean, where does he put them all?**
Gremill

***Ikaruga*: Go on, it looks pretty. On your shelf. You'll play the game for, like, ten minutes before repetitive death gets the better of you.**
Olimite

***Crackdown 2*: Like *Crackdown*, but without the beta you bought it for in the first place.**
tin robot

***Rise Of The Robots*: As featured on the cover of Edge.**
Skerret

I was reading Inbox in **E**216 and got the distinct impression from the comments about 3D that gamers/enthusiasts are starting to worry about the march of technology, rather than welcoming it and embracing it as we did in the past. Although of course there are very valid points as to how those with disabilities will be catered for in the new technologies (eg, poor eyesight for 3D).

Some of the best moments for me recently have been playing multiplayer *Mario Kart* on the Wii and watching streaming Flash-encoded Simpsons episodes on a small laptop in bed. Both operate at poor resolutions in comparison to what I could get with our 1080p TV and PS3 or DirectX 11 desktop. But both are such great fun because we are making the technology work for us, rather than being slaves to the technology. Not all games have to be played in hi-def; they're supposed to be enjoyable. Entertainment doesn't have to be watched in 3D – especially if it's a Sunday and I can't be arsed to get out of bed.

I think this is something we all need to remember. I'm not trying to go on a power-to-the-people rant here but, as consumers, we can dictate what tech sells and what doesn't, by buying what we want or need, rather than what we are told to. Sure, 3D is great, but that doesn't mean we all have to run out and upgrade right now. And at premium/new release prices. I'm sure I'll upgrade to a 3DTV when there's some decent movies and games to watch and play on it, and when the price has dropped to something more reasonable.

The manufacturers will of course still release 3D kit, and a lot of it sure does look appealing, but we can all look at our own needs and means and make an informed decision, rather than panicking about whether we should or can afford to upgrade, and worrying about being 'left behind'. If Avatar's the only thing you can watch on your new 3DTV and you thought that movie was crap, you don't need a 3DTV! Yet.

Can't we go back to the days when we were excited about new technology, rather than acting like frightened sheep in the face of technological advances like the rest of the general populace? I thought we were better than that.
Mal Woolliams



Nintendo certainly didn't get to where it is today by making Wii an HD console, which supports your perspective. If you don't really crave a 3D-enabled TV, though, don't you at least hanker after a 3DS?



Roger Ebert has long maintained his opinion that videogames can never be art, and recently defended this stance when presented with a counter argument made by Kellee Santiago, president of thatgamecompany. Santiago cites three examples of videogames that support her idea that videogames should be considered art – *Waco Resurrection*, *Blow* and *Flower* – all of which Ebert dismisses as "pathetic". What's interesting about this debate is that both Ebert and Santiago use different definitions of 'art' to support their cases. Santiago argues that "art is a way of communicating ideas to an audience in a way that the audience finds engaging" whilst Ebert avoids giving a concise definition, but states that art "grows better the more it improves or alters nature through a passage through what we might call the artist's soul, or vision," and boldly states that we know intrinsically what is art and what isn't, as it's a matter of taste.

But as soon as you bring taste into the equation, you're demonstrating your own subjectivity, just as Ebert is. Just because a Rothko or Pollock piece is simpler in construction than a da Vinci or Picasso piece doesn't make one art and one not. Why would Carmina Burana be art and Scissor Sisters not? I'd argue that art is a creative endeavour intended for appreciation by another person. The broadness of the definition is unfortunate but necessary to avoid cultural snobbery or ignorance. And however unfortunate it is to Ebert, this sadly means that videogames are art. A more important question would be why does it matter?
Tom Wilcox

The 'are games art?' question inevitably leads to matters of semantics, which tends to obscure why people ask the question in the first place. Is it out



of a desire for legitimacy? If so, seeking cultural approval through a technical definition seems like a misguided approach. On the other hand, if gaming's acceptance as an 'art form' resulted in braver, bolder experiments from designers, then clearly it could only be a good thing. Ultimately, though, we're very much drawn to your final point. What does it matter indeed?

As a follower of colonial American literature (through books like Postcards by Annie Proulx and Cannery Row by John Steinbeck among many others), there is a common theme that spans all literature of that time, and of many books to follow, and that is the ideal of the American Dream, the pursuit of a mythical oyster that will make all your dreams come true. After playing *GTAIV*, having to make decisions that would change lives and not bank balances for the first time in the *GTA* series was a step I liked, but I found myself rushing through the missions and side-quests just to get through them, the buildings were lifeless and the people indistinct, and the little attachment I had with the game was due to the story.

Then there was *Red Dead Redemption*. My initial thought was 'This is *GTA*... but with cowboys – awesome!' However, after only 30 minutes of play (getting to know the controls, etc) I started to feel part of a story, and not just a thrown-together, 'this person is bad, this person is good, kill this person' kind of story. I had emotional connection with my character, even though he wasn't just a pixellated version of myself (which is a cheap gimmick in my opinion). This was a story, in which the subtleties were there to John Marston's background – you know a little, learnt more but were still left in the dark. It was a real read.

Aside from the intriguing storyline, I was also amazed that I wasn't rushing through the storyline just to get to the end credits and say: "There, another game done, where's the next?" Every now and again, say as the rain started and I was atop a cliff edge, I would stop and stare into the distance of Mexico, and just take in the scenery. I realised at this point that this wasn't merely a game, it was something new, something unique, a platform which was attempted by *Uncharted 2* (the idea that a game is similar to a film), but was only perfected by the developers of *Red Dead Redemption*. It's as if they gave you the words, and with button-press upon button-press, you tapped away the storyline like loving fingers to a familiar typewriter. Forget the glitches, *Red Dead Redemption* really caught on to something here, something which I hope to see again in the future (*LA Noire* looks like the best bet), a little oyster in the creative world of gaming.
Iain Pettitt

Every now and again, say as the rain started and I was atop a cliff edge, I would stop and stare into the distance of Mexico, and just take in the scenery

Red Dead Redemption presents one of Rockstar's most successful attempts at fusing videogame mechanics and story. But it's interesting to note that the clifftop sightseeing you describe is a moment only possible because *RDR* isn't tied to the relentless momentum of a linear narrative. There's no reason why a videogame's story should be weaker than one in a book or film, but it should complement, and not intrude, on the moments that are only possible precisely because it's a game. Now, your new DSi XL should keep you occupied as you wait for *LA Noire* to arrive.



***Red Dead Redemption*: so much more than *GTA* With Cowboys, as Iain Pettitt has discovered**



Topic: The toy analogy

If there aren't challenges, rewards and a focus on gameplay mechanics, if there really isn't a 'game' in the true meaning of the word, the label toy can be sneeringly slapped on. It's a toy because there is no defined purpose by the designer, you can just waste your time and play around with it. Or to put it in another way, you can define your own goals and guide your own experiences. Now it's starting to sound a bit like... well... life!? By definition isn't an Xbox a toy? Look at us, grown men, playing with our toys!
AhMunnaEetChoo

I like toys. I'm old. IPhones are toys. Fast cars are toys. Games are toys.
-sigge-

I don't see why you think the phrase 'toy' is negative. Games and toys are different. Games have rules, a purpose and usually a means of winning. Toys are for playing and creating your own rules with. What's wrong with the second?
Djorn

Oh I don't think that it's negative. I'm arguing against the people that do! Ultimately I would prefer a different label for non-games though as it's quite hard to remove any subconscious reactions to the word. It's very easy for someone to to use 'toy' as a dismissive criticism.
AhMunnaEetChoo

Rule #1 for games developers: Do whatever makes it more fun. If that's removing the objectives and just letting the users play, then do it.
Blue Swirl

As a manager/creator of family games (board, card games and such), the company I supply for regularly catalogues and promotes them in the kids toy section, thereby negating the majority of the market they are aimed at. Games are an entertainment medium in their own right, labelling them as toys is an injustice.
W3881N5

In an age when media, work, and life in general continually battle for our attention, why do game developers insist on putting ridiculous Achievements in every release?

Between now and December, I have no less than ten games lined up to be bought and played. How on Earth is one supposed to even finish that many games, let alone mess about 'collecting all orbs' or whatever?

Particularly irksome is the fact so many devs are tying inordinate numbers of Achievements to online play – which is fine if the online play in question is extremely good and well subscribed, but woeful if the online play is hideously broken or if you are unlucky enough to pick the game up a few months after release to find the servers all but deserted. Unfortunately, these online Achievements also lead to idiots boosting for the Achievements during matches, which ruins it for everybody else because they're not playing the game properly. And what if you don't play online? Some people don't like to; some people don't even have internet connections. Should they be chastised for this by not being allowed the Achievements?

While I like Achievements, they antagonise the obsessive completist in me – often goading me into playing a

Continued

mediocre game for far longer than it probably deserves, which leaves a bad taste in my mouth and makes me resent the game and its developer.

Surely a set of Achievements largely tied to the completion of the main game would be better, with the majority saved for actual achievements. For instance, pulling off a difficult headshot in an FPS, or executing a perfect trick on a skateboard could be considered an achievement, as they require practice and a modicum of skill. Running around with the arbitrary task of 'collecting all hidden gold' is not an achievement at all; rather it is a shameful exercise in pointlessness and you can bet that 90 per cent of the people out there who have 'achieved' this have just used an online guide to find all the bits anyway. And then there are those online Achievements again: in what way is 'play X game mode ten times' an achievement? What have I achieved by being forced to play a game mode that I may not even enjoy?

Whilst I appreciate that some developers are always going to lack a little imagination in defining their Achievements, surely it wouldn't be too hard for Microsoft to exert a little quality control on said content, thus making Achievements a joyous addition to the game rather than a false extension to play time.

Ross MacDougall

Like any weapon in a developer's arsenal, Achievements can be used effectively or poorly – but largely tying them to game completion seems like a waste of their potential. Implemented well, they can provide an incentive to play games in unconventional ways, such as in the case of *Halo 3*'s 'Annual' Achievement, which sees you and three friends hurtling through the last level on ghosts. Collect 'em all Achievements can seem a little uninspired, but in the case of *Limbo* (p90) they provide one last batch of puzzles in the form of a scavenger hunt. As for Achievements' multiplayer implementation, agreed – though there are plenty of other ways for players who don't take competition seriously to undermine a game.



Topic: Attention to detail

I've just started *Red Dead Redemption*. For me, the aspect that makes it so much of a joy to play is it goes where other games don't bother.

For example, yesterday I started a mission with some guy supposedly yelling to another guy in his house through the closed front door. I assumed as a player that there was someone inside the building. Rockstar went that little bit further and showed an NPC through the window wondering if the guy had gone away while the cutscene (with in-game graphics) rolled on.

Once you've hog-tied a crim and left him outside a jail, someone will come and pick him up to take him away.

I was told by a stranger that someone had robbed his store. I left it too late to catch the bugger but when I went to look for him I found him still running away. Any other game would've made that NPC vanish once out of sight, no?

I was always impressed and intimidated by how bloody dark it was at night in *Fallout 3*. Rightly so! It's night time, and there aren't any streetlights around, are there?

When I started playing *Street Fighter IV* my eyes lit up when I saw two characters seemingly interacting rather than bouncing off the ground and each other.

I remember reading either Dan or Sam Houser saying they wanted the player to have to drive for a couple of hours and buy gas on their way to a mission. I don't think I'd like that to ever become the norm in *GTA* but wouldn't it benefit certain games to lean towards that kind of thinking?

Neutral-fanboy



Crackdown 2's Achievements for finding audio logs? Don't let Ross MacDougall see them

Last issue's coverage of E3 raised some interesting speculation as to the future of narratives in videogames once 3D graphics and, to a lesser extent, motion-capture become widespread. But though such developments make games more technologically inclusive, their narratives can still remain worryingly narrow.

Specifically, I am talking about the lack of gay protagonists in videogames. Of course, gay relationships have been possible in games for a while now (more recently in *Fable*, *The Sims* and the oeuvre of BioWare) but player freedom is not the same as putting a gay character on the cover of a game.

I hesitate to use the terms 'hardcore' and 'casual' in these shifting times, but it's still 'hardcore' games which give us our gaming icons (Mario, Lara Croft), and I can't see any rainbow flags from where I'm standing.

We've had some encouraging NPCs (*The Longest Journey*'s Fiona and *The Ballad Of Gay Tony*'s Gay Tony) and some depressing playable characters (*Enchanted Arms*' bitchy Makato and *Fear Effect*'s lipstick lesbians Hana and Rain), but it would be nice to have an openly gay or lesbian protagonist as well-developed (and publicised) as the characters in *Heavy Rain* or even *Prince Of Persia*.

I know that a gay hero (or a lesbian heroine whose purpose is not merely to titillate) would be a marketing risk for publishers/developers, but look at it this way: videogame heroines from Ms Pac-Man onwards have arguable been responsible for the slow but steady trickle of women into the gaming industry as well as the increasing volume of female voices. When will the game arrive which vocalises the currently silent LGBT gaming demographic and maybe – just maybe – brings new players' attention to a medium from which they currently feel underrepresented or even excluded?

Most of all, openly addressing this issue of sexuality and inclusion would do more than cement gaming's validity as a relevant art form than motion-capture and 3D graphics are ever going to.

Mary Goodden

Hopefully the article on p82 addresses some of these issues. And thank you for making it look like we do requests.

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